

THROUGH



THE EYES OF A



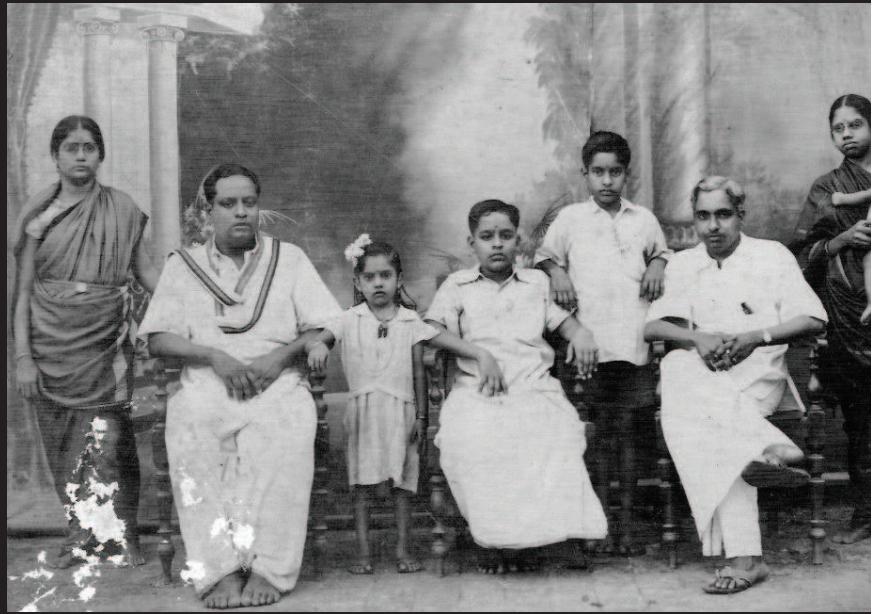
DAUGHTER

the story of my parents by kamala parthasarathy

APRA



part one



How it all started

I was at my friend Nagu's house in January, 2011. GRP and I had gone there to condole the demise of her father. She showed me a folder containing a family biography that her brother had written. It contained details of her parents, all the siblings and various family events. It was poignant, amusing, and all the family members truly enjoyed going through and getting reminded of various happenings, both happy and otherwise. Seeing this gave me an idea. I wanted to put in writing the profile of my parents for my daughters, nieces, nephews, grandchildren, grandnieces and nephews, so they may get an idea about their grand and great grandparents. The first person I thought of contacting, to give me her account of her experiences with my parents was my dear cousin, Rangamani. Prompt as she is, she sent in her piece, a lovely write-up on my mother. Her account was so touching, truthful and hilarious that it moved me to tears. Now I know that whatever is written should be an honest opinion with candid information of the good and the not so. Thereafter I talked to several other people to give me their accounts and following is my best effort at writing about my father, warm, affectionate and generous, and my mother, equally warm and generous and also impulsive and fun loving. I hope my effort is worth reading and gives the readers an idea of the kind of people my parents were.

My father

My father Krishnaswamy Ramanujam was born in the year 1910 to Rukmini and K. R. Krishnaswamy, called K.R.K. Iyengar by all. I do not know the date of his birth. His astrological sign was Cancer, so he was probably a born in June.

My father, Appa as I am going to refer to him, was not very tall or handsome, and had a loud, gruff voice that belied his gentle nature. He never cursed or swore and his voice always expressed love and affection.

He was born in Sirkazhi, a small town in Tamil Nadu. Appa had an elder brother Thiruvegadathan Iyengar, and two sisters, Vijayam, the oldest child, and Pattammal, the youngest. His father, K.R.krishnasway Iyengar was a leading lawyer in that town. In those days, the lawyers were the elite of the society. Appa completed his schooling in the Sabhanayagr Mudaliar Hindu School in Sirkazhi and received his Bachelor's degree from Pachaiappa College in Chennai, and later received a Diploma in Pharmaceuticals in Bangalore. He worked first as a clerk and then a manager at the Central Bank in Kumbakonam. He was transferred to different branches throughout Kumbakonum and elsewhere, and I was born when Appa was posted at Thiruvaur, a town about 40 kilometers from Kumbakonum. I was

named Kamala after a deity in the temple.

We lived in a big house on Dabir Street in Kumbakonam, and I have faint memories of that house. There was a huge living room which opened into a dark kitchen on the ground floor. The first floor had a similar long living room with built-in cupboards on either side. There were two staircases, one from the verandah in front and one from the kitchen at the back. We slept on the first floor. The front yard was large and square, paved with rough tiles.

Appa and Amma had four children. Srinivasa Raghavan (Periyanna) was the oldest, born in April 1930. Sampath Kumaran, the second, was born in January 1933. I was born in April 1944, and my youngest brother Murali in August 1948. Amma gave birth to two more children, one between my two brothers and another between Sampath and myself, both of whom died at birth. She also had a miscarriage after Murali.

As Appa continued working at the bank, he began to feel that his income was not enough to support his growing family. Amma's older sister, Pattamal Vedantha Iyengar, whom I called Periyamma, lived in Bangalore with her husband. Periyappa, came from a very rich family. He was an engineer who had a high post in hydroelectric projects in Karnataka. He and his wife had three sons, Kannan, Sampath and Varadu. In 1949, Sampath and his two cousins, Kuppuswamy and Rangaswamy, planned to buy a pharmacy, and in 1951, Kannan began a printing shop. Periyamma invited Appa to join her sons in both business ventures, and he accepted.

Around this time, Periyanna had just graduated from college, and Periyappa got him a job at Kirloskar Electric Company in Bangalore. He was living with Periyamma's family. So the decision for the family to move to Bangalore was easy.

Appa did not have the money to invest in these businesses. Appa's father had died young, and he bequeathed his house in Sirkazhi to Appa. However, his older brother, also my Periyappa on the paternal side, refused to vacate the house and Appa had to file a lawsuit against him in court at Sirkazhi. Amma's older brother, Shri. Raghavachari (my Mama) was a lawyer, and represented Appa in his case. The amusing thing was that Appa and Sri. Raghavachari would go to Sirkazhi for the hearings, during which time Periyappa would insist that they go to his (disputed) home and have lunch, which they would accept. After lunch, they would go to the court to fight the case against each other. Despite their legal troubles, Appa and his brother still remained close. Appa realized that his brother would not vacate the house not because he wanted to cheat Appa of his share but because he had a large family

and had genuine money problems. Appa helped three of his brother's sons to come up in life. In the end, Appa won the case and finally sold the house to pay for his share of investments in the two businesses. With a new job for Appa and money to invest, our family moved to Bangalore in 1949.

Appa and his partners bought the Seshamahala Pharmacy in Bangalore and later renamed it Kalyan Pharmacy. It exists even today in the same busy City Market area in Bangalore under the same name but different ownership. The printing shop was also named Kalyan Printers and Appa became a partner in the printing business, along with Kannan, Varadu and C. R. Sampath, my uncle, Shri Raghavachari's older son-in-law. C. R. Sampath was a giant of a man who was probably over six feet tall with broad shoulders, a square face and bushy eye brows, yet a very cultured, gentle and soft spoken person.

When we first moved to Bangalore, we stayed with Periyamma in her sprawling house, though we soon moved to a rented house in Chamrajpet. It belonged to a rich landlady, Mrs. Deshmukh, who owned several houses in the area. Our house was in the end of a small lane close to the famous Shankar Mutt temple and monastery and it was identical to the house next door. I remember its layout quite well. There was a living room, which opened into a bedroom on the right. Beyond it was a large hall, which had another bedroom to its right. The hall opened into a dining room. There was a tiny kitchen to its left. A small passage to the right led to a bathroom and opened into the backyard. The toilet was outside but close to the backyard door and could be reached easily. It was covered with asbestos sheets and had a wooden door and running water. The steps that led to the backyard had a ramp to move Periyamma's motorbike into the yard. There was a big stone with a rough top on which clothes would be washed. The cloth would be rubbed gently on the stone and it would emerge clean. The bathroom had an oven with a built in copper cauldron that held hot water for bathing and was closed by a wooden plank. The bathroom also contained a shower area paved with rough stone that prevented people from slipping and acted as a pumice stone for scrubbing rough heels.

The rent was eighty rupees per month, and I remember going with Amma to Mrs. Deshmukh's house on the first day of every month to give her the rent. I loved to go with her and steal glances into the landlady's beautiful house. Amma never missed the first day of the month and was very proud when the landlady commented that among all her tenants, we were the only people who were so regular with the rent payment.

Appa would go to the printing shop early in the morning, and return around 8:30 a.m. After a second cup

of coffee he would have a bath and have lunch with whoever was at home at the time. We had never heard of breakfast in those days. All of us would sit at our designated places eating off sterling silver plates. After lunch Appa would leave for the pharmacy for the rest of the day. He would walk with his bicycle until the end of the lane, and Amma would go with him. When he reached the circle, he would wave to Amma, who would wave back and return home with a smile on her face. I recall now that Amma would always welcome Appa when he returned from work with such a lovely smile on her face as if she had not seen him in a very long time. They were devoted to each other throughout their marriage.

There were about seven houses in the lane and everyone knew everyone else. I would walk in and out of any of the houses at any time of day. I would eat whatever they offered, sometimes even from their own plates! Amma never worried about where I was at any time, since the neighborhood was very safe and the neighbors were good people.

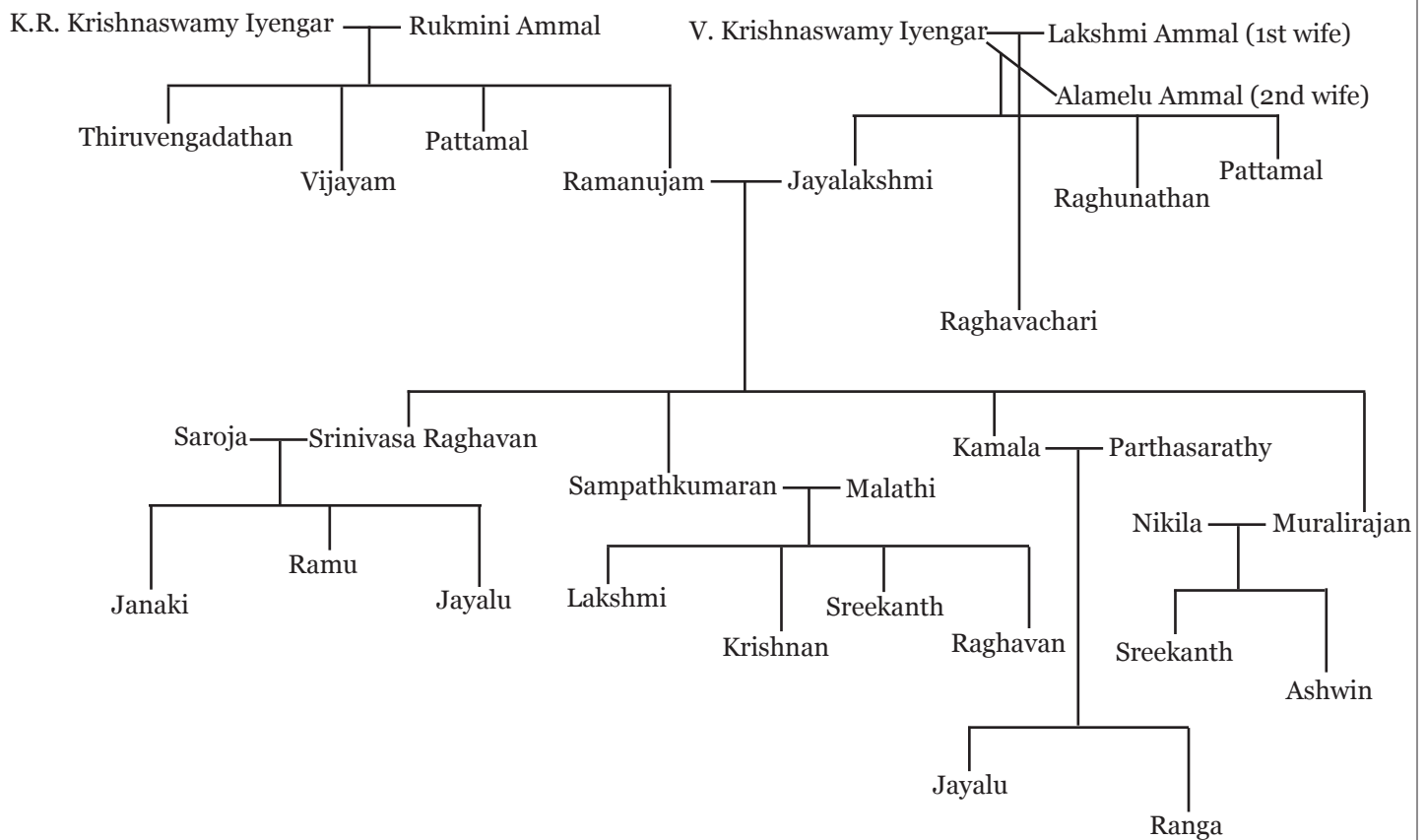
Our next-door neighbor was Subbannachar, a lawyer. He had five children, Malathi, Bharati, Raghanna, Chinu and Guru, who were all very scared of their father, only speaking in whispers when he was around. Whenever he ate lunch, he would belch very loudly. It would sound like a siren blowing, and Murali and I would be in splits laughing.

Ganesh Chaturti was a very important function at their house. A huge idol would be brought home and the family would make a large mandap decked with flowers. A puja and prayer ceremony (aarati) would be held in the evening. During the ten-day long festival, I would be at their house during all my free time.

When the Subbannachar family bought their own house and moved away, another family moved in. They



(From left) Amma, Appa, Periyamma, Sampath, and a friend's family pose in a studio in the early 1940s.



Appa and Amma's Family Trees



(From left) Bharathi, myself, Murali, and Malathi pose at the gate of our house in Chamarajpet.

were a very cultured and sophisticated family, a husband and wife with seven children. The oldest daughter, Ranganayaki, was a doctor, and there were two more daughters, Vishali and Kamala, as well as four sons, Swami, Mani, Dorai, and Balu. None of the children was married. Vishali was very short and always wore high-heeled slippers. I was in awe of them and when no one was looking would try them on. Their mother was very sick and weak, and she died a year after they moved in. Their cries after she died kept me awake for a few nights. Swami could sketch very well and Kamala was a talented painter. She painted a beautiful scene in my autograph book and wrote "Sweet remembrances from your friends at Park-Face", which was their name for their house. Many years later, may be in the year 1965, when I was living in Park View at Sion, I met Vishali, who had got married and had a daughter. They soon moved to France.



Sundari Paatti holds baby Janaki in Bangalore in 1957.

Around 1952, we moved from Chamrajpet to our own home at 89 Third Cross, Gavipuram Extension, Bangalore. All of the four partners at Kalyan Pharmacy lived on the same street. Amma sold some land she inherited from her father, and the money she received, coupled with some of Appa's savings, were used to buy this place.

In our own home

Our home was fairly large, with a compound in the front and a yard at the back. The front entrance had three small steps with a ramp in the middle to move a motorbike onto a small verandah. On either side of the verandah were two bedrooms used by my older brothers. The verandah opened into a big hall, which connected to a third bedroom on the left. This hall opened into a large dining room, partitioned into two rooms, one of which opened into a kitchen. The dining room had a Perumal Medai to store the mandap and the pictures of gods. There was a glass fronted cupboard where the silver utensils used for daily prayers (aaradhanam) were kept. On the opposite side was a table with an electric hot plate for making coffee. At the right end of the dining room was a large, airy storeroom. It contained shelves to store plates; grains, fruits and vegetables, as well as cupboards with wire mesh doors that held milk and buttermilk. The right side of the partition opened into another small verandah, which connected to the bathroom. This location, near the rear of the house, allowed the sweeper to enter through the back door and clean the toilet every day.

The backyard had a well and an area with running water, for the maid to wash utensils in. There was also a washing stone for clothes. Before the yard was paved, Amma had a vegetable patch, and grew beans, okra, and tomatoes. After the paving, only the huge lime tree survived, and it continued to produce many limes.

The front yard had many flowering plants, particularly jasmine. There was an arch above the gate filled with jasmine vines, and even now, the smell of jasmine brings

back memories of my Bangalore days.

Our home had a mother-in-law's quarters (we called it an outhouse) that was separate from the main house, which contained a living room, bedroom, and kitchen. The outhouse used to be rented out from time to time. Later it was rebuilt and had one large room and a bathroom with a western style toilet. On the right of the outhouse was our granary. Amma's father would send paddy, urad dal, and moong dal every year from his fields and the paddy would be stored there. It would be taken to the rice mill to remove the husks. We always had semi-polished rice (brown rice) during those days. I do not remember eating white rice as a child.

Sundari Patti and others

Appa always insisted on having a cook in the house, so that Amma would not be burdened with the day-to-day cooking. Therefore, we always had a cook, and two live-in servants, a maid and a manservant. Our cook in the early days was Sundari Patti. She was with us for decades, and for the longest time, I thought that she was a close relative. Widowed young, she was childless, and her only relatives were a brother with many children and a sister. Her brother and sister would visit her, staying at our home, and Appa was very hospitable to them. Sundari Patti had a shaved head, as widows did in those days, and she wore only a white sari, with no blouse. Yet, she did not look obscene. I remember her as a good looking woman with a rosy complexion, straight backed and very fit. This was probably because she was physically active throughout the day, cooking for the fairly large family, grinding batter for idli and dosa, and drawing water from the well, as well. I have quite a few fond memories of her. However I remember one of her rituals very clearly. Every two months, a barber (pariyari) would come early in the morning to shave her head. Afterwards, she would draw water from the well, pour it over her head and body, and then have her regular bath. She religiously followed the rules set for her by her family and society. Given her good looks and youth when she was widowed, she could have attempted a fresh start, but society prevented her from committing that grave sin by shaving off her hair!!!

Sundari Patti left us when her brother died. When I came home to give birth to Jayalu after my mother's demise, the only woman in the house was my young sister-in-law, Saroja Manni. Appa wanted someone more experienced to care for me following child birth. so Sundari Patti came and stayed with us for two months.

Over time, we had other cooks, always widowed and destitute women. Working as a cook was the only living these women could eke out in those days. Two of our cooks

were Kannamma Mami and Padmasani Mami, wonderful women who worked tirelessly from morning to night. Living with us, they had no days off and nowhere to go if they were given one.

I remember Kannamma Mami liked to use English words in her conversations. Once, when my aunt's family arrived unannounced at midnight from their pilgrimage, Mami woke up and cooked a full meal for them. She then told my aunt (in tamil) "Next time please drop a kalana(one paisa worth) card and I will have readymade (in English) food for you all." How we laughed! After the night's work she was up and about in the morning for another demanding day.

Padmasani Mami would draw beautiful rangolis at the entrance to our house. Once she had drawn a beautiful serpent, but I did not like that design at the entrance. She said that there was no harm, since Lord Vishnu slept on Adishesha, the seven headed serpent.

All of them cooked well, but Sundari Patti's cooking was different. Her vegetables were always undercooked and crunchy, while I liked mine cooked to a pulp. If I complained, Appa would say "Learn to eat vegetables that way. It is good for health".

When we were inbetween cooks, Appa would help amma with cooking and the kitchen chores. He would be constantly by her side chatting in the most companionable manner. But in the evenings he would be at work and hence had another widowed lady Chellamma Patti for help. Chellamma Patti was blind in one eye and wore only the cream coloured sary called the Narmadi. She had a widowed daughter and two granddaughters. Chellamma Patti was



Saroja and Periyanna during their wedding ceremony. Murali is to Saroja's left and other family members are behind.

extremely punctual and showed up at our doorstep at four every evening. She would chop vegetables, grind masala and make batter for idli and dosa. She would fill water and clean the kitchen which would be spotless when she left. I do not know what she was paid. But Amma would give her a good meal and a large glass of steaming coffee with lot of sugar. I think coffee was one stimulant all these women needed after the back breaking work they did day in and day out.

A person of varied interests

Appa had many interests. He was fond of reading. He subscribed to the Illustrated Weekly (Kushwant Singh's famous magazine), Readers' Digest, and bought all of the condensed editions of novels published by the Digest. He would regularly listen to the daily news broadcast on All India Radio. He particularly liked newsreaders like Melville D'mello, Roshan Menon (the only lady newsreader then), and V. N. Charapani. He would also listen to the radio newsreel programme once a week and the BBC broadcast every morning, and did not like to be disturbed during those times. Appa was also fond of music. After moving to our new home in Bangalore, he had given up the printing shop partnership, thereby freeing up his mornings, during which time he would walk around the house whistling his favourite tunes over and over again.



(From left) Sampath and Malathi give me a gift on their wedding day at her father's house on Pachiappa Mudali Street in Kumbakonam.

As a pharmacist, Appa kept several bottles of medicines for immediate relief of minor ailments. There were always two bottles; one with iodine and the other with benzoin. The former was for cuts and burned the skin when applied. The latter was used to soothe a sore throat. Appa would use a thin stick (cut out of a broomstick!) with cotton on the end to paint the solution on our throats. Very soothing it would be! He also kept a number of injection syringes and needles of different sizes and thickness. During home visits, if our family physician had to administer an injection, Appa would select the syringe and the needle (very thin ones for kids and also his wife!) and sterilize them himself. As the doctor gave the injection

tion, he would stand over his shoulder and wince when the needle went in. He would lovingly massage the part after the prick and felt everybody's pain, physical or otherwise. Pity no one, not even any of his four children felt his.

Our family physician was Dr. Parthasarathy Iyengar. He had his dispensary in Gandhi Bazaar. Whenever summoned, he would walk all the way to our home after his working hours carrying his medical kit. He was in his late fifties and would wear a full suit complete with a tie and a turban on his head. He would always sport a namam (vaishnavite symbol with two white lines with a red line drawn on the forehead). Whenever he was called to attend to someone at home, Appa would come home from the pharmacy. After the doctor attended to the patient, Appa would insist that he have coffee and some snacks at our house, since he had to walk all the way back to his house. Dr. Iyengar's Tamil pronunciations were a source of amusement to Amma. She would ask him to say 'vazhappazham (banana). He could never say that and would say 'valappalam'.

I also remember Appa's eco- friendly habits. When the municipal water service was introduced, water had to be filled up for use at home. There were built-in cement tanks in the kitchen and the bathroom for water storage. In the kitchen instead of filling the tub with the help of a rubber tube, Appa used a long bamboo split in the middle lengthwise. One end of it was tied to the tap and the other end would be placed in the tub and water would flow down the bamboo into the tub. In the bathroom, there was a rubber tube. He would siphon the water from the hot water cauldron and the tub into a bucket for bathing purposes. Seeing him siphoning for the first time, I thought that Appa was doing some magic trick!

Ever-helpful Appa

Making morning coffee in the house was Appa's job. An early riser, he would filter the coffee decoction and keep it ready and hot. The silver jug with the decoction would be kept in a saucepan of boiling water. Appa would then wait for the milkman, Raghavan to deliver the milk. Raghavan stayed near our old house at Chamrajpet, He had a dairy farm with several cows and buffaloes and continued to deliver milk to us even after we moved to Gavipuram Extension. He would come all the way to our house with a cow and its calf. He would show the empty vessel to Appa and then start milking the cow. Milk would be delivered warm and frothing twice a day. Our milk consumption was huge for we had coffee, some of us had a nightcap of milk and all of us needed curd and buttermilk. The poor cow not only provided us with milk but also made two long trips to our home along with its calf. The milk

being of such good quality, Amma also separated the cream and made butter and clarified butter (ghee) at home. Appa would bring in the vessel, boil the milk and offer fresh, delicious and aromatic coffee to each of us as each one of us walked in.

We had a cat, which Amma got from her friend's place to take care of the mice and cockroaches at home. The cat did a good job of it. Her favourite was Appa who gave her fresh milk every morning. Her bowl was a large coconut shell and Appa would fill her bowl thrice for her breakfast. After her enormous meal she would waddle to the steps to the backyard, lie down, start licking and cleaning herself and doze off. When any of us was sitting on any of the couches, she would nonchalantly climb up and settle on our laps for a snooze. She was with us for about three years and one day went missing. Amma suspected that someone must have stolen her, since she was a beautiful cat, white with brown patches.

We had two servants who lived with us, a young boy named Maya and a middle-aged woman named Meenakshi. Maya had been with Ambulu Ammanga's family and came to work for us when they moved to Salam. He was tall and dark, rather dim on the uptake but a good worker. He would arrange our beds in the night and roll them up in the morning. He would help the maid with washing clothes. Maya did other odd jobs around the house; he ran errands for us and sewed buttons on blouses when Amma was learning to sew. He folded Amma's saris and always went about his work in silence.

Meenakshi was also dark but had sharp features and looked good. Her husband had abandoned her, as she had no kids. She would sweep and swab the house and wash vessels. In the evenings, Meenakshi and Maya



Family members pose during Murali's wedding in Srirangam in the early 1970s.



(From left) Appa and Parthasarathy watch the rituals during our wedding.

would carry water in buckets from the back yard where the water was, all the way to the front yard to water the plants. Both of them did this chore tirelessly everyday. Besides coffee and snacks they were given substantial amounts of food twice a day. Meenakshi slept in the granary room and Maya somewhere in front. They were both happy with us foAppa was a very generous person and took good care of the servants.

Generous to a fault

Appa's generosity needs to be dealt with in detail. Most times, I approved of his generosity wholeheartedly, but at other times, I thought it was unwarranted, impulsive, thoughtless and wasteful.

Appa's elder brother had four sons and a daughter. He needed help with his sons which Appa readily offered. Raju (Krishnamacahari), the eldest was not too keen on studies. So after his school finals, Appa invited him to Bangalore to live with us and also work full-time at the pharmacy. Appa also got him a bicycle, so he could go to work and return home on his own. Raju was treated like a member of the family and upon his marriage, he lived in our outhouse with his wife, Bhooma for a long time. He then moved to Chidambaram, a small town in Tamil Nadu famous for the Nataraja temple and the Annamalai University. There, Appa's cousin Dr. Sriraman, who was a reader in Physics, got Raju a job in administration. Raju had five children, two sons and three daughters; all of them are brilliant and professionally qualified. Raju's wife died and he lived with one of his daughters in Chennai. When Jayalu and Ranga got married, Raju arranged for their wedding mats from

Sirkhazhi. They are a specialty of that town with the names of the bride and the groom and the date of the wedding woven into them.

Raju's younger brother Rangaraj wanted to study law and asked Appa for help. Appa invited him as well to live with us, go to law college in the mornings and work at the pharmacy during the days to earn a living and pay his school fees.. Rangaraj stayed with us until he finished his studies and thereafter got a job in the Survey Of India, in the capital city of New Delhi. He married Chandra, my eldest aunt (Athai) Vijayam's daughter. He died young and Chandra was given a job in the same organization on sympathetic grounds. Brought up in a conservative place with minimal education, she rose to the occasion, worked hard and brought up her kids. I heard that she now lives in the west with one of her children.

My uncle's youngest son Raman also stayed with us for some years when he studied in Bangalore. By that time I had been married and had moved away from Bangalore, so I do not have many memories on him.

When Amma was in the Cancer Institute, in Chennai, then Madras, Pattamma Athai's eldest daughter Rajam came to see her. Rajam and her husband Krishnaswamy are very cultured people. They have brilliant sons and daughters. Rajam spoke to Amma about her parents' difficult days at Srirangam and that her father was unemployed. Athai had five daughters and four sons. When Rajam came to Amma, three of Athai's daughters, Rajam, Padma and Maragatham were married. But the youngest daughters, Malthi and Bhooma were still young and all the sons had yet to finish school as well. Amma knew that her days were numbered and that her husband would be shattered when she went. She wanted to provide some emotional support to him and at the same time help his sister. So she invited Athai's family to move to Bangalore. Athai was a wonderful person, very patient and loving and she provided the much-needed emotional support to Appa.

Periyanna had started working as soon as he finished his graduation and helped the family financially for many years. So when the pharmacy started doing well Amma bought a house for him close by (Periyanna repaid the money in installments to Amma). Periyanna of course stayed with his parents and his house remained vacant. Athai's family moved in the house and lived there for fourteen years. Athimber was given a full time job in the pharmacy and Appa helped the family to whatever extent he could. Come to think of it, Kalyan Pharmacy, just like my father took in all those who needed help. All Athai's sons did well. Seshadri took up a government job after graduation. Sampath passed out of MIT and after a stint with

IFFCO, started his own business. Rangarajan got a job in Kirlosker's with Periyanna's recommendation and retired from the company only recently. The youngest Singan is doing extremely well in Bangalore and is married to Kala, his sister Padma's daughter. Malathy and Bhooma are married. All of them are lovely people and always speak very fondly of my parents and express their affection to them.

Sajoja Manni's brother Rangan came to Bangalore. Rangan's father (Manni's father) was a leading advocate in Kumbakonam. Anna encouraged Rangan to follow his father's footsteps. So Rangan also studied law and worked (where else?) in the pharmacy during the day. Appa treated him like his own son. Rangan stayed with us for two years, graduated from college and started his own practice in Kumbakonam. He has excelled himself in this profession. He and his wife, Ranganayaki, are a very warm and hospitable couple. They are now settled in Srirangam, a temple town near Thiruchrapalli in Tamil nadu. We meet them when we go there or at Bangalore on important occasions.

I am extremely proud of my father for all this generosity in him but did not approve of his wasteful habits. I especially remember an incident that exhibited Appa's wastefulness that involved my cousin Rangamani. She was and still is a favourite person to our family and her father Papa Mutha (my mother's older brother's son) was my parents' favourite too. Their family visited us often. During one such visit, Amma mentioned that Rangamani was fond of flowers. That did it! When Appa went to Gandhi Bazaar for the usual daily fruit and vegetable purchase, he bought back a bag full (yes, a whole bag full!) of flowers. I remember as he emptied the bag on the table out came heaps of huge flowers, colorful and lovely. There were giant marigolds, sunflowers, asters, dahlias and more. Rangamani was enchanted and wide eyed. My mother was so proud of what her husband had done. She kept repeating to one and all, "You must have seen the child's face. It was radiant with delight". She had this habit of repeating. Not senility. Remember? She died young. I was very angry. It certainly was not jealousy. I was and am fond of Rangamani too. The flowers were too heavy and numerous to wear in our hair; even if they were to be displayed, their stems were too short and we did not have any flower vases. They were also leaving that evening. Being very sensitive people they took all the flowers with them. I did not want to think what they must have done with them. I thought Rangamani would have been equally delighted with one, two or even three flowers of that size. Why twenty? It must have cost at least ten rupees, a good enough sum then.

It was again the same with weekly magazines. We were all avid readers and bought many magazines at home. They were weeklies, fortnightly and monthly magazines.

There were at least seven of them. Appa would buy two sets every week, one for his house and one for my Athai's house. I would wonder why he should have done that. They living a stone's throw away, there were many visits to and fro the whole day and we could have managed with one set. But it was a big no for my father. During those days I was in Bangalore awaiting the birth of my children. I had no courage to take him to task or talk to him plainly. I would sulk. The poor man would think that I was missing my mother and try to divert my attention. It would mean buying or doing something for me spending more money! That was just what I did not want him to do. Hopeless situation! Though I grieved at the loss of my mother, I did not miss her. I had the best mother in my father. Even today I can't help thinking that if only he had been a little careful with his money he would not have had the financial difficulties in his last days. Thought about tomorrow and prudence with money were simple missing in his DNA.

Good days

Kalyan Pharmacy started doing well. The partners worked very hard and were very ambitious. As the family finances improved Appa was more relaxed. Murali and I were in school. Periyanna was married to the still most beautiful Saroja. Janaki and Ramu were born. Much later after Amma's demise they had one more daughter Jayalakshmi (chinchu) named after my mother. Sampath was married to my Mama's daughter Malathi (equally beautiful!). Lakshmi was born soon after. Sampath working for Hindustan Lever was transferred out of Bangalore to Hubli. Thereafter, he was transferred to Chennai, Hyderabad, Mumbai and then back to Chennai. Sampath never returned to stay at Bangalore any more but came only on special occasions. We visited him frequently and always had a gala time during our holidays at his home. Sampath and Mala had three more kids, three boys, Kichi, Srikanth and Raghva. Srikanth and Raghva were born after Amma's demise.

Appa loved food! Around 7:30 am he would snack and his snack was not normal breakfast food, but savoury delights such as thengozhal, manangombu, murukku, cheedai, and mixture. These dishes used to be made in large quantities at our house. Appa would take a plateful and I would follow suit! He would eat as he was listening to the morning news and walk around whistling. After his bath, we would lunch together. Appa would leave for work while Murali and I would leave for school. In the evenings when Murali and I returned home from school, there would be some tiffin (small snack) like dosa, idli, uppma etc. Then there would be dinner. Appa would return home around 8:30 and the entire family would dine together. We had standard food, nourishing and not too heavy; there would be sambar, rasam, and a vegetable. Papads were a must.

Some times there would be fried preserves (Vathal). Our meals always included fruit. Appa would buy dozens of oranges, apples and bananas. He would also buy tins of mixed dry fruits and biscuits, plain and creamed. Amma would store them in glass bottles in a wooden cupboard. My young life was one of gourmet delights. Speaks volumes about the size I was in. Took decades to reduce, but reduce I did!

Some evenings on holidays Appa, Amma and I would go for a walk, up to the National High school grounds where a street vendor would be selling “Brain Tonic”. That was spiced crisp puffed rice (kurmura), mixed with roasted groundnuts and curry leaves. It was some thing to die for! I remember how the vendor would greet Appa. He would say “Banni Sar, Kanle illa. Double packet thogolli”(Welcome sir. You have not been seen these days. Buy double quantity.). Appa would smilingly take what he packed and pay him cheerfully. On the way back I would have eaten a good quantity and Anna would pounce on the rest when we reached home.

The Kalyan Pharmacy partners ordered crates of apples from faraway Kulu for their families every year, even though there was no dearth of fresh fruit in Bangalore. The partners’ prosperity at the time must have inspired this indulgence. Each partner would get two crates of red, crunchy, juicy apples each individually packed in paper. Our crates would be kept of the platform in the storeroom. Amma was very careful to see that not a single fruit got decayed or spoilt. She would check them, rotate them and some times cover them with a wet cloth. She did not have to worry for long for we would help her by finishing them in a short period of time!

The partners had a meeting every Sunday in one of their homes. All the partners lived on the same street, a few yards from one another. What they discussed, I do not know. But I know that they had a breakfast, which would be a monumental meal. There would be idlis or dosas with vada, chutney and sambar. Some times it would be pongal floating in ghee and bursting with cashew nuts. All of them ate very well, with two or three helpings of each dish. Their weekly meetings were a source of amusement to all the four families because we did not know if any work actually got done!

The month of October was the new accounting period in the Pharmacy. The entire staff and all the partners and their families would have a gala

Author’s note: Besides the grandchildren, there is one more person who had good rapport with Appa. That is dear Rangamani. Her parents lived close to Anna’s house, where Appa lived and Appa would visit them often. He was very fond of Rangamani’s parents and they reciprocated Appa’s affection. When I started the biography, I asked Rangamani to write her thoughts about Appa, which she readily did. Her piece follows.

My first memory of Athimber is at my grandmother’s place in Kumbakonam. A huge plate full of kalkandu was kept out of my reach in the dark storeroom. I had been eyeing it for a good while and wondering how to get at it. Suddenly Athimber went into the storeroom and got me a big fistful of kalkandu and told me to go somewhere quiet and eat it up! I could not believe my luck and obeyed him without a murmur. No wonder he became a favorite with me all my life!

My father had a similar tale to tell about Athimber’s kindness. When he was young, my father was very fond of mangoes but did not like the messiness of eating it whole. Once when the house was flooded with a rich mango harvest, Athimber called my father aside and taught him to suck out the juice from a small opening and then eat the mango pulp. My father was overjoyed and remained a loyal fan of Athimber.

He was a very kind person and very observant too and unfailingly reached out to persons in need. He was generous with money, time and affection. Though a part of him died with his loving wife, he remained the same caring person. There was a tinge of sadness in him due to the loss. He was often at loose ends not knowing what to do with his time. He visited us frequently and spent long hours at home, all of us having whale of a time. We could discuss anything with him and he would patiently explain things and encourage more questions. While he was popular with us, he could not handle his son Murali. He was totally lost and could not relate to him well. He indulged him with every comic that was issued and got him everything he fancied but could not form a bond with him. Looking back, I wish some of the women folk from the family had pitched in to help. Perhaps Murali could have benefited by the gentle woman’s touch, I do not know. But for his times, Athimber was far ahead and enriched the life of every one around him. His memories still remain dear to us, decades after he passed away.

Author’s note: It was indeed a fault in my Appa that he could never be assertive nor could he demand certain things to be done or not done even when these actions caused him a lot of pain. When Murali was in his final years at school, Appa could not make much time for him, as he was really busy with his work in the pharmacy. But later when Murali started working in Kirloskars, and he got married, Appa did bond with him. He loved Murali’s son Srikanth. He went to their house every day to spend time with the child and also saw to it that Nikila was comfortable.

dinner at the Woodlands Hotel on Sampige Road beyond Cubbon Park. We would look forward to it and all of us would be dressed to the hilt. Even Appa would dress up. Normally, Appa wore only a dhotie and a white shirt or jubba, but for the dinner night, he would wear his dhotie in the traditional style with a pangkachham and have an angavastram on his shoulder. Not only that, we also forced him to wear chappals, something that he did not always do! Appa would look regal and impressive, all dressed up.!

The dinner would be a really grand affair, with sambar, rasam, kootu and curry. In addition there would be chips, fried papads, vadas, pongal and puliodarai, payasam and more sweets. There would be jangri and chiroTTY, a multi-layered puri and a specialty of Bangalore. Powdered sugar would be sprinkled over it. The puri was so light that with a slight tap it would crumble to small pieces. Sweetened, warm milk would be poured over it and eaten. I always had two of them. The staff would eat well and all will go home sated, happy and sleepy.

Diwali was always a special occasion also. So many dishes would be made, each stored in big tins. Sweets and diwali marundu will be special items and they would be exchanged among the partners' families. For me, the highlight would be the Diwali malars, special editions of the usual magazines we bought. They were my delights during this



Jayalu and Ranga pose at a studio in Bombay in 1967.

festival. For the next ten days I would be busy reading all of them. Knowing how fond I was of these books, Appa would order every malar that was published.

Every Sunday Appa would take Amma to a movie, usually a Tamil movie. If the actors were my favourites, I would also tag along. Appa had a regular carriage driver (Jatkawalla), who would come in his horse-drawn carriage, to pick us up at the appointed time. The driver would be waiting to pick us up at the end of the movie and would bring us back home. We did not own a car and Appa would not take a bus, as this mode of transport was very convenient. I don't think they missed any good movie and they saw the bad ones too. It was their weekly outing that they did not want to miss at any cost.

Kalyan Pharmacy bagged a very profitable deal. It became the sole wholesale distributor for a popular milk food called Dumex. Revenue increased manifold. To celebrate the occasion, all the partners went to Tirupati with their families. How well I remember the trip! All the married women wore nine-yard saris in the traditional way. Amma made me wear a sari also. A private bus had been hired. The trip was so enjoyable with jokes and music galore. We stayed in the choultry belonging to the devastanam (temple) on the previous evening and early the next morning, we went to the temple for Suprabatham (waking up of the Lord with prayers and music). We stood in the sannidhi (sanctum sanctorum) for the whole session. We were standing so close to the Lord. In those days the temple was not as crowded as it is to day. Standing in the sannidhi for nearly twenty-five minutes as we did that day is unheard of now. These days we get a glimpse of the Lord when we go through the line with the volunteers physically pushing us away from Him. It must be a conditioned reflex in my mind that whenever I hear the suprabatham, that fortunate day of the past flashes in my mind.

With the wholesale dealership a separate wholesale shop was opened close to the Pharmacy at the Silver Jubilee Park Road. It was called "The Kalyan Drughouse". It was a stone's throw away from the main shop. Close by was the famous restaurant, the Bombay Chandra Bhavan. Appa was very fond of sweets specially Jangiri (Ranga must have inherited his genes). Every afternoon Appa would have coffee at Bombay Chandra Bhavan along with jangiri and some other savory. We loved going to the shop at that hour for it meant a treat. Murali especially loved it. Once Murali went all by himself (without telling Appa) and had a veritable feast. When the bill was presented to him, he nonchalantly told the waiter to charge it on his father, a partner of Kalyan Pharmacy. At once he was told, "Aagli sar, billannu navu doddavaarkade kalusthave" (ok sir we will send the bill to the respected elder). Murali was also asked if he wanted

any thing else! That night however, Appa was livid. He told Murali that he should not have gone into the restaurant without money on hand. Murali was confused. He felt he had not done anything wrong. He had charged his bill on the most creditworthy, human credit card! But then he did not realize that Appa had a moral compass and took his directions only from it.

It was the same all over city market. When Amma and I went for any purchase, and if Amma tried to bargain she would be told. “Neevu thogundu hoga ammaavare. Naavu doddavarakade billannu thogothave” (Please take what you want madam. We will take the money from our respected elder). Surely when the bill was presented to him, Appa would have paid the asking price without a second thought. This was the kind of respect he commanded all over City Market. Kalyan Pharmacy was an institution there.

With prosperity came progress. A second branch of the pharmacy was opened in Madras(Chennai). Rangappa Mama moved with Vimala Mami to Madras to take care of the shop. In Bangalore, a dispensing section, was opened in and Kalyan Pharmacy became a dispensing chemist’s shop. Those days, not many family physicians had dispensing sections in their practice, so Kalyan Pharmacy provided a much-needed service. They would provide, pills, potions (mixtures, they were called) and powders as per the doctors’ prescriptions. Once I was standing near Appa when a patient brought in a prescription. Accordingly Appa prepared a powder using a mortar and pestle. He divided the powder carefully according to indicated dosage and made neat packets for every dose. Then Appa, the linguist, told him in a mixture of English, Tamil and Kannada “after food, solpa neerakki (adding a little water) kudichudu (drink)”. I burst out laughing. That was the joke during dinner that night. Appa argued that the important thing was that the patient should understand what is being told. Since Appa had seen to it, his lack of fluency in Kannada did not matter. Perhaps so. He conversed with people and all his staff this way and was well understood.

Our dinnertime had its own fun moments. Appa loved tender mango pickle (mavadu) He would have three or four small mangoes each time. He would bite into the raw mango in such a way that it gave a kind of clicking sound. No matter how many times all of us tried, we could never master that knack. Some days we would beg Appa to give us our food in our hands. He would take a large vessel; mix ghee (lots of it) and sambar. The vegetable will be on the side. He would make us all (including Amma) sit around him in a semi circle and give us a mouthful on our palms. We would gobble the food. When this was done all of us would consume double the quantity and if the cook knew about it in advance the dinner preparation would be



(From left) Raghava, Appa, Chinna Jayalu, Dr. Sriraman, Papa Mutha, Sreekanth, K. R. Rajagopalan (Papa Mutha’s brother), Sampath Iyengar (Nikila’s father) watch the ceremony during Nikila and Muralis’ wedding, (at front) Nikila, and Murali.

on a larger scale

Liked by one and all

Appa had a cousin Dr.Sourirajan. He was the younger brother of Dr.Sriraman of Annamalai university. He was doing postdoctoral research at the Tata Institute Of Science, now the Indian Institute Of Science. He was also doing some kind of project in The Raman Institute Of Science run by Sir. C. V. Raman, the Nobel Laureate. Souri Chithappa (as I called him) was very fond of my parents. He would come home during weekends and spend a relaxing day with all of us. Amma would have special dishes prepared for him. Since he was in the hostel, Amma felt he should be given home- cooked, special meals whenever he came over. Once, he invited us, (my parents and me) to the Institute. After showing us around he took us to the Raman Institute. As we entered, Sir C V Raman himself got out of his car. He recognized Chithappa, who introduced Appa to him. The distinguished gentleman himself took us inside and showed us around. We went to his private lab where he explained something and switched on some lights and the small rocks kept on the shelf shone as if they were covered with a velvet cloth. I remember Appa asking him a lot of questions and he seemed very happy to answer them. After the visit, Appa patted Chithappa on his back with so much admiration in his eyes that Chithappa beamed with pride. The only thing I remember about the visit was how Sir CV Raman looked. He was dressed in full suit with a turban on his head. However much I try, I cannot remember anything more about the visit. Such a shame that I cannot recall what Sir C V Raman himself told us about the Raman Effect, the discovery that got him the Nobel Prize.!

All our relatives were fond of Appa. Souri Chithappa got married to Kamala and moved to Canada. They have a son, Krishnan. After Appa’s demise, when we were in



Thiruvengadathan Iyengar, Appa's older brother, poses with his grandchildren at his son's house in Bombay.

Sion, Chithappa got my address and wrote a letter to me asking about Appa's demise. He came over to our place with his wife and son and had dinner. He spoke so fondly of my parents.

His elder brother Dr. Sriraman (also my Periyappa) was also very fond of Appa and he was a regular visitor at our home. He had a daughter Maithili, who was about my age. She had some major problem with her eyes. She could not see well even after several operations. For every one of those surgeries done in Bangalore, they would come and stay with us. Appa gave Periyappa a lot of emotional support that was much needed during his daughter's difficult days. Maithili died when she was in her thirties..

Active, understanding and sensitive

Appa was always very active. I had never seen him sitting idle or resting. Even after Amma's demise, whenever we were between cooks, he would help Saroja Manni in the kitchen.. That was his nature. Manni's sisters speak very often of those days when they visited their sister and they would be amazed to see Saroja's father-in-law giving her a helping hand, something that was unheard of at the time.

Appa and Amma were very generous with the needy. I remember a young boy Satya who came to our home every evening with a vessel in hand. He would say "Bhavati Biksham Dehi" meaning, "Please give me alms" That was the way poor Brahmins would ask for food. It was an unwritten rule at home that he should be given food every day. He would accept whatever others and we gave, in a single vessel. It would be a mixture of all kind of food. Appa was particular that what we offered him should be from the freshly prepared dinner for the night. Satya was a hard

working, brilliant boy. He lived in a small house on our lane. His family was large and his father was unemployed and ailing. Satya went to evening college and worked in some office during the day. Later Appa engaged him to teach me Sanskrit (for I needed some help with the subject initially). He had warned me that I should never mention the days when Satya came asking for food.

An old man would come every Saturday begging for money. I had named him 'Saturday old man'. I would always give him half an anna (the coin of those days). One Saturday he told me, "I cannot come next Saturday. So give me that day's quota to day only". I was angry. What cheek this fellow had to make such a demand! Appa had a hearty laugh and told me to give that man the extra money. He added that charity should not be done with anger. That poor man did not want to miss out on his Saturday's share as it probably meant a lot to him.

I cannot forget the days when I was with Appa when I had delivered my daughters. He was always close by. During the nights, he would wake up at the slightest disturbance caused by the sleeping kids. He would be up to change their nappies. He would sterilize their feeding bottles. Whenever he was around, Appa would prepare their formula. In those days for about forty days after childbirth, lactating mothers were given a herbal digestive called leghiyam, a delicious preparation similar to halva. It had to be eaten very early in the morning. Though we had a cook to help in these matters. Appa would wake up around four in the morning and bring me a tablespoon of leghiyam warmed on a beetle leaf. He never missed a day. I do not know if he used to go back to sleep after that, but I would be fast asleep at once. Similarly at ten in the night he would get me a cup of warm Horlicks. I remember so well that it would come in a long silver tumbler (We had about a dozen of these tumblers and used them for all beverages). He was again absolutely regular. I wonder, didn't he ever become tired, or sleepy or have a headache? Could he not have delegated the job to his cook? The answer was NO. He



(From left) Ranga, Murali, Jayalu, Janaki and Chinna Jayalu (at front) at the entrance to "Jayalakshmi".

did not think that he could ever tire of doing something for his child (no matter what the age of the child was). The thought of that Horlicks now brings back the sweet taste I had in my mouth and the thought also fills my eyes with tears.

Another shameful memory that I have is the day when I threw up on the floor of our living room. When I was pregnant, I had felt full and felt uneasy in my stomach for about two days. Thinking that at the stage I was in, proper intake of food was a must, I continued to eat. Late one evening, I brought out all that food right in the middle of our living room. Coming to think of it now, I was not that sick that I could not have rushed to the backyard or the toilet to vomit. The floor was full of that stinking mess. Appa at once went out and brought a lot of sand and covered the mess with it. He brought a broom and swept the mess into a tin sheet. After he threw it out, he cleaned the floor with an antiseptic. There was no disgust on his face. He did not complain. He did not say that I should have known better (now I know for sure) than to vomit inside the house on the floor. Well, more like him are not made now. The Good Lord must have thrown away the mould. He must have realized that these men were too good for practical life!

Appa and our academics

Though Appa wanted us to do well at school, he never participated in our academic life. He never came to my school or interacted with my teachers. When I was in the 11th standard (SSLC it was called) I was worried about Algebra in which I was weak. I confided in Appa that it was worrying me. Within a week, Appa had arranged private tuition for me in that subject. Mr. Keshava Rao, a mathematics teacher in Acharya Patashala was very popular and competent. He trained many students, all boys privately at his own home. Appa requested him to come to our house to teach me. The

Author's note: *Sreekanth shared some of his memories of Appa with me via email.*

My dear Athai,

You are absolutely correct in stating that we might not have had much time with Thatha to form too many memories, but I do have a couple:

As you might remember, Appa had a business as a distributor for various products and ran this business out of the lower floor of the house. The rooms were piled with boxes in several stacks. On occasion, Thatha would allow me to play hide-and-seek with him and it was tremendous fun. I don't know if you remember the house, but there was a porch right outside Thatha's room where he would sit and relax after the office was closed for the night. There was a railing (about 12 or so feet long) and I kept trying to walk on that railing. Thatha used to walk right next to me to keep me from falling and would clap and celebrate every time I walked from one end to the other. He would encourage me to keep trying and would challenge me to do it three times in a row, etc.

On rare occasions, he would allow me to help him in the office by having me count the number of boxes of specific products. He usually would not allow me in the office during business hours, so the times he allowed me to either play or help in the office were rare treats.

While these are my fond memories of Thatha, the over-riding memory I have associated with him is about the day he passed away. That day was the first time I saw Appa cry and I still remember Appa being inconsolable in his grief. I remember being in tears myself, but my memory of that moment is being upset myself because my Appa was crying. I don't know why I was not more upset that Thatha had passed away, but I believe this was the first time I had

experienced someone passing away.

Since Prashanth and Madhav were both around seeing Appa in his final months as he deteriorated, I honestly believe they were much better-informed and prepared to deal with his death when it happened.

I thought back to my reactions when Thatha passed away and compared it to how my sons dealt with my father passing away. What a difference!!! My tears were because my father was crying, not because my Thatha had passed away. Prashanth and Madhav cried for their Thatha in a way I never did. Whether this was because they had so much more time with him, I cannot say for sure. Athai, I thank you so very much for allowing me to relive these small memories. In the years since Appa's death, I have faithfully executed the shrardam rites each year and have recited the names of our ancestors. The next time I perform these rites, I know I will think about Thatha and these memories when I utter his name. I remember seeing Paati's photo in our Perumal room and asking who that was and why her photo was amongst the pictures and vigrahams of "ommachis". Appa's explanation was something to the effect that "she was a guardian angel

I distinctly remember Appa putting Thatha's photo next to hers in our Perumal room and all of us praying together. I look back now and wish I did have more time with Thatha to get to know him better. Unfortunately, I never even got to meet Paati because she passed away before I was born. I will wait for your account of their lives when you have compiled it to help me understand them better.

Much love, Sreekanth

teacher could allot me an hour only early in the mornings and agreed to come home at six every morning. The fee was a princely sum of Rs.25. Appa would wake me up at 5:30 a.m. to get ready for my tuition. Mr. Keshava Rao will arrive promptly at 6:00 a.m.. The class would be held in the outhouse. Five minutes after his arrival Appa would appear with a steaming cup of coffee for the teacher, which Mr Rao would accept with a smile. The ritual never varied.

When the SSLC results were announced, Appa happened to be at home. The result would be published the previous evening in the newspaper and the mark sheet would be available in the school the next day. Appa went on his cycle to the Prajamatha and Janavani (the two popular local news papers) office. The results were posted on the notice board. He checked my number, found that I had passed in the first class and came home beaming with pleasure. I was awarded a certificate and a silver cup for having come first in Sanskrit in the exam. Neither my parents thought of coming to the school for the award ceremony nor did I think of inviting them. We were all happy and that was about it.

When I was in the Mt.Carmel College, the bus belonging to the college would pick me up and drop me at the doorstep. But during the exams I had to use public transportation. Appa would accompany me to Gandhi Bazaar from where I would take bus no.2, to the cantonment area, which was a fairly long distance from our house. One morning the bus did not arrive till 7:30 a.m. and I was expected in college in half an hour's time, so Appa took me by an autorickshaw. He was surprised that my college was so far away. That was the only time he ever visited the place where I studied. He put us through school and college and trusted that we would do our best and come out well.

Trouble ahead

Everything was going well for our family until around early 1960, Amma started complaining of swallowing difficulties. The doctor did not think it was serious. Around May, 1960. Appa and Amma went to Kumbakonam for some puja. There are two routes to get there and no direct train. One could go via Trichi or Chennai. The former was shorter and hence used often. My parents took the shorter route to get to Kumbakonam and returned via Channai, so they could spend time with Sampath, Mala and the kids. Sampath had Amma's throat x-rayed, after which my parents returned to Bangalore. In two days Sampath called and said that the doctor had some doubts about the x-ray reports and wanted to check Amma again. Both my parents went back. After some more extensive tests Amma was diagnosed with cancer of the gullet. She was admitted at once into the Cancer Institute at

Adayar, Chennai, under the care of two eminent oncologists, Dr.Sadashivan and Dr. Shantha, both pioneers n cancer research. Having gone to Chennai in the month of June, Amma and Appa returned to Bangalore only in December, 1960.

While at Chennai, it was determined that Amma was not strong enough to withstand surgery. As was the norm at the time, Amma was started on radiation treatment. The cancer was exposed to cobalt rays for about ten minutes every day. It was an aggressive treatment. The area of exposure became dark and soft. But it must have worked since Amma could eat without pain. Appa never left her side during the daytime. He would come every morning with her food and attend to all her needs. He would give her food, make fruit juice, get her coffee and try to cheer her up. By then, it was known that her days were numbered. Since Amma was in the female ward, Appa could not stay with her during nights. Three wonderful women from Amma's family took turns to be with her during those six months. They were Amma's elder sister and my Periyamma, Pattammal, her elder sister-in-law Padmasani Ammal and the second sister-in-law Komalavalli Ammal. None of them lived in Chennai. Periyamma lived in Bangalore and my other two aunts lived in Kumbakonam. But taking turns among themselves they never let her be alone even for a single night.

Accepting the inevitable

I think that during the period when Amma was in the hospital; Appa and she must have had a lot of discussions, reminiscing their life together, and planning for the future minus Amma. I being the only daughter and being of marriageable age in those days, Amma wanted me to be married and settled before she went. When she was in the hospital, I had visited Chennai once. Appa took me for a walk one evening and told me what his wife wished and why I should agree to that. I was shocked to hear about



Sampathkumaran and Malathi with their family and friends.

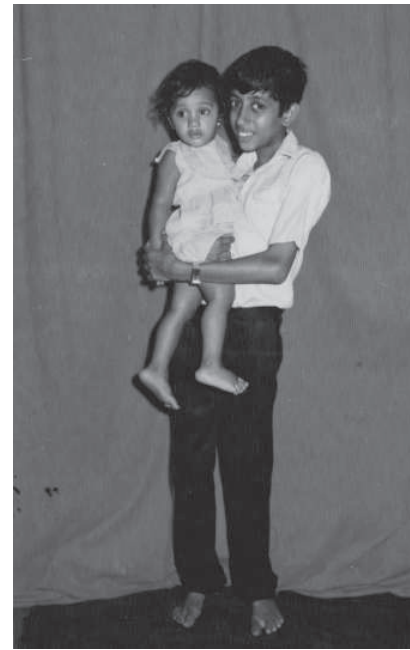
Amma's condition and agreed to her wish. Now when I recall those days I think it was some kind of intuition that made Appa make a firm decision about my studies. I had wanted to be a doctor. I had secured very high marks in my SSLC exam and could have easily got into the science stream in my first year in college. But Appa would not allow that. He said a medical course would mean my studying for a minimum of seven years and he could not see it happening. He insisted that I study in the Arts stream instead. I had to discontinue my studies midway to get married.

Much to her surprise Amma found that her classmate in her school was also in the institute with breast cancer. That lady died recently of old age. With her help and contacts Appa and Amma fixed my marriage. When they returned to Chennai, I was asked to meet my future husband, Parthasarathy, whom I married on 2nd February 1961.

Appa knew how much this marriage meant to Amma and gave in to all her wishes. There was no compromise on expenses. . A grand wedding was planned and celebrated. I wonder how Appa managed the expenses. Amma's treatment must have been expensive and this was soon followed by my marriage. He bought everything that I would possibly need to start and run a home. How well I remember some incidents! I moved to Lucknow with my husband. My parents came to Chennai to see to see us off. Appa called me aside and gave me Rs.100/ for my immediate needs till I feel comfortable to ask my husband for money. In the Madras Central station, he went to the shop and came back with two things, a thermos flask and two dozens of clothesline clips! He just remembered that he had not thought of them till then. I met my parents together for the last time in the station. Within the next six months just as the doctor had warned, Amma passed away.

Amma's demise though expected, shattered Appa. I remember the day of the funeral. The pyre was ready. Appa, Murali and I were sitting aside. When Periyanna lit the pyre, Appa could not bear to watch. He took my hands in his, covered his face with them and cried; the only time I had seen him cry.

Life went on and Appa had to move forward. His duties were still pending. He was young, in his early fifties. Murali had not settled down and was still in school. He continued in the pharmacy and kept himself busy throughout the day. Meantime, the pharmacy also was also encountering problems. The Dumex dealership was withdrawn as a company called Pfiizer bought the product.t. The pharmacy's revenue was drastically reduced. Nevertheless, the other contracts and the dispensing section of the pharmacy kept the business afloat. His sister living close by must have



Srikanth (Kuttiipayya) holding his brother Ashwin in Bangalore.
been some kind of comfort to him.

Meantime I came to my father's home for the birth of my daughters. I was given the best medical help and he did all that he could to keep me in cheer. He helped me to care for my babies and also saw to it that my health was fully restored after childbirth. He attended my children's first birthdays, laden with gifts for them.. When we were in Malad, in Mumbai GRP developed a shooting pain in his left shoulder and had palpitations. We thought it was a heart attack and I called Appa around 9 in the night. He told me not to worry and that he would come to Mumbai. But I had certainly not expected that he would arrive at 12 the next day, which he did! He was with us till it was found that GRP had no heart problems. That was the only time when Appa stayed with me for about eight days. He came twice when he accompanied me back home after the birth of my newborn daughters, but never stayed for more than a couple of days each time.

Around 1965 Appa withdrew his partnership from the pharmacy. But there were some legal issues, which went on for a decade. Anna moved into his own home after Athai's family vacated and Appa moved in with him, having leased his house to an old lady who ran a catering business. Around 1970 , Appa sold his house. Murali got married Appa used the proceeds to rent a small house for Murali and his young wife and furnish it with all the requirements to start a family home. Murali married the young and lovely Nikila, who was the daughter of Manni's elder sister Shakunthala. . Murali and Nikila had a son Srikanth (Kuttiipayya) and one more son Ashwin after nearly ten years. Kuttipayya died in a tragic accident leaving behind his young wife, Aruna and two daughters Akshaya and Abhi-

naya. Aruna works for Infosys and lives in Bangalore. She is a lovely girl and keeps in touch with all of us.

The last days

The legal issues in connection with Kalyan Pharmacy continued for quite a few years and got finally resolved around 1974. About that time, Sampath resigned from his job and started his own business. He requested Appa to move to Chennai and help him with his business. That must have been the best news for Appa after many years. He immediately moved to Sampath's home and helped with his business. This must have been a second lease of professional life for Appa. He was both usefully and gainfully employed. Sampath was living in a large two-storied house in Chennai. He lived with Mala and kids on the first floor. The ground floor had his office and storage. Appa had his own lovely room complete with a sit out and attached bath. This must have been the best arrangement for Appa, both interdependent and independent. After a year or two, around early 1976, Appa developed some kind of skin infection, which did not respond to treatment. He must have sensed that his end was near. He visited his family temple at Anna Parumal Koil and met with his only living sibling his elder brother.

During this time, GRP was in Chennai. He went to meet Appa and spent some time with him. Appa would always carry a photo of Annam Paerumal wherever he went. It always hung in his room where he could see it when he got up in the morning. He removed that picture and gave it to GRP to be handed over to me. This was his last blessing and final good-bye to me. . .

Around mid April 1976, Appa went to Bangalore to Periyanna's place. He had wanted to die only in his eldest son's house. On 1st May 1976, he had his first and massive heart attack at 7:30 in the morning. He was rushed in vain to the hospital. Appa was sixty-six years old at the time.

The telegram informing Appa's demise arrived in Mumbai around nine in the morning on the same day. I was to go to Bangalore later that month with Jayalu and Ranga. I was looking forward to that trip. In my previous trip, to Bangalore, Appa told me that I was grossly overweight and if I did not reduce, I may have health issues. I decided to do something about it and devised a physical regimen, (which I keep to this day) and reduced my weight. I was looking rather trim (in my opinion) and wanted Appa to see me. But it was not to be. Ranga and I rushed to Bangalore by air within a few hours and GRP and Jayalu followed in two days. When Appa was taken to the cemetery, Anna, Sampath and Murali were to go in the hearse with Appa. I insisted on going and young Janaki who

Author's note: *Jayalu and Ranga spent a year in Bangalore. They studied in my alma mater, Mahila Seva Samaja. Jayalu wrote about what she and Ranga remembered about their Thatha. Jayalu wrote:*

All my memories about Thatha are non verbal rather than actual verbal inputs. While I always felt protected and safe when I was in his company, it was more due to his solid presence rather than anything he 'said'.

I mainly remember his eyes which to my childhood impression were always very 'sad' looking. May be in retrospect as an adult, it was probably 'compassionate', rather than sad. The other impression is his posture of standing with 'his hands folded' and the crisp white really white kurta he wore when he went out.

When Ranga and I lived in Bangalore for a year, everybody made us welcome but poor Janaki must have been most put out. We went to school with Janaki and her friends, sat with them through lunch and just in case they forgot us also watched them practice 'ball badminton' in the evenings (I think they were a champion team). On the rare occasion, we walked to school by ourselves; we would take a 'detour' and play on a slide enroute. On one such occasion, I spotted Thatha following us at a distance in a cycle. Obviously, he was making sure, we were safe and got to school on time. It was what Thatha did that made me feel really safe.

Author's note: *Yes, Appa did make children feel very protected and cherished. This year we were in London on Appa's death anniversary. Jayalu took us to the Krishna temple near her home. She had also arranged for a Raj-bog Aarati in the temple in the names of both Appa and Amma. I had tears seeing their names on the board. The biography has brought the grandchildren close to the grandparent.*

Reading about Appa's eyes, I too remember an incident. When we were in Sion, a bullock cart carrying blocks of ice would be brought in the evenings. Stopping the cart near our home the cart driver would cut our huge slabs and deliver them to the nearby hotels and juice vendors. Once I was passing by and happened to look at the eyes of the ox. Something prompted me to come home, and take out a photo of Appa and look at his eyes. They appeared so very similar. It was perhaps the same sorrow of the pain of the burden expressed in those eyes. After that day I avoided looking in to the eyes of that animal.

was most attached to her grandfather said that she would certainly go with her Thatha to bid him good-bye. The five of us went with Appa and the final rites were performed by Periyanna.

As I was writing the biography, I was mailing the chapters to Jaylu, Ranga, Rangamani, Janaki and Chinchu. Janaki felt that the biography will not be complete without writing about the interaction that Appa had with his grand children. So I requested all of them to give me their memories.

Jankai had spent more time with Appa than any of the other grandchildren. She had a lot to tell. She spoke about how sympathetic Appa was to animals. Though he would travel by the horse drawn jutkas in Bangalore, he was very strict that the horse should not be whipped to go faster. I remember the way he fed our cat in my younger days. Janaki said that Appa got her join a local library and cultivated her reading habit. When she kept asking her for word meanings, he got her an Oxford dictionary and taught her to find the meaning of words.

This reminds me of Appa's books. He was very fond of reading and had a good collection. After his demise when I went through his books I was quite impressed. There were books by Pearl S Buck, A. J. Cronin, P. G. Wodehouse and many others. He had a medical encyclopedia, a book on the miracle of vitamins. There was one on the essence of Baghvat Geeta . I also remember a book by Napoleon Hill on how to get rich with positive thinking (the recent wave all over).

Ramu had this to say. Appa would feed him every day when he came home from school for lunch. Once Appa gave him curd rice which tasted awful. Ramu refused to eat it and was shouted at by Appa. Still Ramu refused and Appa tasted it to find out what was wrong with it. He had mixed rice with dosa batter instead of curds! When Appa realized his mistake he was full of apology and gave Rs 5/ to Ramu as compensation. Janaki said that she and her friends pounced on Ramu and made him buy eats for them with that money. Ramu secretly hoped for a repetition!



Saroja (Perianna's wife), Perianna, and I pose at Perianna's house in Bangalore. The house was named "Jayalakshmi" after Amma.

As a child Chinna Jayalu (Chinchu) had been pampered by Appa. She has very fond memories (though not much for he died when she was around nine years) of her days with her thatha. She responded to my request and went down memory lane.

She remembered how she would come home from school and demand what she wanted him to provide for her school lunch box the next day (she would have surveyed what her friends had brought) and surely he would pack that for her. He would plait her hair for school. Nights she would sleep with him and he would ask her to expand the names of all the public sector units of Bangalore like the BHEL, HAL etc.

She remembered some of the dishes he would prepare, yummi keerai and awesome pongal (in her words). She fondly recalled how he pampered her father peeling oranges for him and how affectionately he treated manni's brother Rangan who studied Law and stayed in our home. She said that she could still visualize her thatha walking around the house with a mundas (bandana) on his head and whistling his favourite tunes.

She remembers with amusement how he would shout at Murali and Ramu if they teased the other kids at home.

Loving memories and simple tales, touching and sweet. Made me nostalgic. I remember my own lunch box during my college days. Appa would make upma, pack it neatly in a banana leaf and it would fit snugly into my rectangular box, the size of my notebooks. The upma would glisten with the generously smeared ghee and taste divine.

I had also asked Lakshmi, Kichi and Sreekanth. They did not live with Appa in Bangalore, but would visit on holidays and occasions. Two years before his demise Appa went to live with them in Chennai when he helped Sampath in his business. Lakshmi recalled how thatha would lovingly plait her hair and adorn it with jasmine flowers. Sreekanth wrote to me a lovely mail, which I have reproduced verbatim on page 14.

Apoorva was also reading the chapters as I was writing. She called once and told me to write the Sasemira story which Appa would tell me and which I had told Apoorva and Kavya. She said that this was her contribution to her Kolluthatha's biography. I was touched. This was the only story that Appa knew. He would tell me the story sometimes before I went to sleep.

A man was walking near a forest when a tiger

When Kavya so meticulously edited and formatted the biography and suggested that I add more pictures of my parents in their early days, I dipped into my archive of old photos. But much to my disappointment I could not find too many pictures. Photography as a hobby required (perhaps still does) time, inclination and money. For obvious reasons Appa never owned a camera. The few photos I have had been clicked by Sampath with his (now ancient) Kodak box camera. They may not be very clear, but will have to do for this record.

That was the reason why I was so thrilled when Radha so thoughtfully sent me a photo of ancestors (page 23) which showed along with my great grandparents and uncles, Amma's parents, Bangla Thatha and Alamelu Patti. I remembered Bangla Thatha, with whom I had spent time in Kumbakonam during my vacations. Alamelu Patti died within a month of Amma's birth. I could see that Amma resembled her mother. Seeing this precious photo brought a lump in my throat. We had photographs of Appa's parents at our Gavipuram home also, but those were lost in transit when we moved out of that house.

started chasing him. He ran for his life and started climbing a tree. Atop the tree he spotted a bear and was petrified. The bear told the man not to worry. It said that he could stay on the tree and the bear would not harm him. Both of them sat for a long time and the tiger continued to wait below. Then both the man and the bear were sleepy. So the bear told the man to sleep and offered to keep watch. The man slept. Then the tiger told the bear that both being wild animals the bear should know that the man was their enemy and asked the bear to push the sleeping man down. The bear refused saying that it has promised protection to him. Later the man woke up and the bear went to sleep. The tiger told the man that he was foolish to believe that the bear would protect him. It had not harmed the man because it was not hungry just then. After the tiger left, the bear would certainly eat up the man. Saying this the tiger told the man to push the bear down so it could eat him. The man believed this and without second thoughts, pushed the bear down. The bear caught a branch and saved itself from falling down. The bear then told the man that he was most ungrateful and cursed that he would become mad and go around saying "sasemira, sasemira" for the rest of his life. I never tired of listening to this story when I was young. Thanks to Apoorva, I remembered to add this to the biography.

Ranga remembers the sandwiches that Appa

packed for all the kids to take to school - soft white bread sandwiches with the crusts meticulously removed, and smeared with ghee and sugar. Does not get any better!! She also remembers how she and Chinchu would play together and whenever they wanted a prop for their games, Thatha was ever ready to help out.

After this I was about to complete the biography. But then I was pleasantly surprised by a phone call from Radha, Rangamani's elder sister. She asked me why I had not asked her about her memories of her time with Appa. She told me some about some events that really adds colour to the biography.

Bhavani is the eldest of the three sisters. When Papa Mutha's family was in Bangalore, Bhavani was studying in Mt.Carmel College. She would take the public transport to the college and back. One evening on her return, she boarded a different bus my mistake and did not really know the route that the bus took. She sat confused and at the verge of tears. When the bus reached its final destination, she realized that it was the City market area. She saw the name board of Kalyan Pharmacy and at once felt safe. She entered the shop with a tear stained face. Appa was full of concern and found out why she was there and comforted her with Cadbury's chocolates. Since he could not leave the shop during the day, he had her escorted home. This incident reminds me of what Jayalu said about her Thatha, that one felt safe in his company.

Radha also remembered this when she had gone to Chennai with her husband Madhavan and stayed in Sampath's home. Appa was with Sampath helping him in his business. There was a cinema theater close by. Radha had planned to go for the evening show to watch the popular movie Maman Magal (uncle's daughter). Unfortunately her spectacles broke and she was so disappointed. Appa would not let her down. He offered his own glasses and said that they were merely reading glasses and she could manage to



(From left) Nikila and Murali during their wedding ceremony with Ramu in the background.



(From left) Saroja and Periyanna during their wedding ceremony.

see the movie with them. Radha said that she did watch the movie though she had to keep moving them up and down her eyes to focus. But she managed and was so thankful to Appa for his thoughtfulness.

I had failed to ask Radha for her input. Still when she heard about the biography she felt that she should share her memories with all of us. That is what Appa was, compassionate, sensitive and with hands that reached to help out so spontaneously. Hearing her relate this most certainly made me proud of Appa.

There is so much more that I can keep writing about my Appa. I need to stop somewhere. All of us siblings were fortunate in having had such an exceptional father. To me he was both a father and a mother and mothered me as much as a mother would have.

Somehow it has so happened that I finished this account on Father's Day.

WAVE



part two



My time with Amma was not long, but that short time had a strong impact on my life. When I was in my first year of college, she contracted esophageal cancer and was admitted into the Cancer Institute in Madras (Chennai). Six months later, she returned home from the hospital, in remission, and decided that I should be married. After my marriage, I left for Lucknow with my husband and that was the last time I saw her alive. When I recall my mother's short life, I see that she had many blessings. Besides her husband who doted on her, she had caring siblings and children. Though she died young, I still have many memories of my mother, and I have gathered information about her younger days from people like Ambulu Ammanga (Amma's neice) and Saundara Mami (Amma's cousin's wife). My close friend Nagu gave me the idea of writing my mother's biography, and my family has encouraged me to write this.

Early days

Though I do not know when exactly my mother was born, I do know that that Appa was born in the year 1910 and that there was a six-year difference between my parents, making Amma's birthday sometime in 1916.

Amma was born in Kuthalam, near Kumbakonam, in Tamil Nadu. Her father was Shri V Krishnaswamy Iyengar (Bangala Thatha) and her mother was Smt. Alemelu. Amma's maternal grandparents were the elite of Kuthalam and they were referred to as Kuthalathu Iyengar and Kuthalathamma, though I have not been able to find their real names. Alemelu was V. Krishnaswamy Iyengar's second wife, whom he married after his first wife, Lakshmi died young. Before her death, Lakshmi and V. Krishnaswamy Iyengar had one son, Shri Raghavacahari. Alemelu had three children, Pattammal (Periyamma), Raghunathan (Thambi Mama) and my mother, Jayalakshmi, all of whom were born at Alemelu's mother's home in Kuthalam. She died within a month or so after my mother's birth. Not only devoid of a mother's care, the unfortunate baby contracted small pox, a dreaded disease at the time. The disease covered the baby's small body with deep blisters, including one on her right eye that left a white dot in the middle of her eye. The blisters were extremely painful for the baby, making it difficult to lift or move her. For days on end she was placed on tender banana leaves smeared with castor oil to ease the pain. I dread to think how miserable it must have been for the newborn. Yet Amma survived and came to her father's (Bangala Thatha's) home at 57 Pachaiyappa Mudali Street in Kumbakonam. Once home, she was pampered by every member of the family.

Bangala Thatha had four siblings. He and one of his brothers, Shri Ramaswamy Iyengar (Chithi Thatha), were leading lawyers in Kumbakonam and lived to-

gether on Pachaiyappa Mudali Street, though they moved to a farmhouse with Bangala Thatha's son and daughter-in-law (Thambi Mama and Mami) on Vetti Pilliar Koil Street after retirement. They also owned a village, Seethakamangalam, fourteen miles away from Kumbakonam. Chithi Thatha's wife died young and he brought up his brother's children as his own, though Amma was his favourite. Jayyu was her pet name, but my father always called her Jayam.

Thatha's home in Pachaiyappa Mudali Street was a veritable palace, and I remember the facade very well. There were broad steps to enter the house, and at the top of the steps, there was a two-level verandah (thinnaï) on either side. Three clerks would be seated on the floor (of the verandah?) in front of their desks, busy preparing the paperwork for the various cases that the lawyers were handling. The steps led to a passage that opened in to a huge hall, and on the left was an open quadrangle with a swing. This square was surrounded by glass-fronted cupboards with thousands of law books and old records of legal cases, most of which were never opened. However, living in this setting stimulated a deep interest in learning for Amma. My sister-in-law, Mala had heard from her mother that as a small girl of three or four years Amma would constantly be running around her home with a heavy book in her hand, which she would not part with at any time. She would tell her sister-in-law that books were Saraswathi and that she was going to name her daughter Saraswathi. I was not named Saraswathi, but Amma was very keen not only on my education, but also her own later on in life.

To the right of the hall was a huge bedroom used for childbirth, with windows opening into the thinnaï. Amma, her older sister, (Periyamma), and my cousin Ambulu Ammanga gave birth in this room, and I think even Mala delivered her first-born, Lakshmi here. The women never went to hospitals, as the midwives and older women in the family were quite capable of handling childbirth.



Sunset over Sarangapani Koil in Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu, Amma's hometown.



(Back row, from left) Rajagopal Iyengar (Bangala Thatha's nephew) and Alamelu Ammal (Amma's mother), (middle row, from left) Saranayaki Ammal (Amma's grandmother), Viraraghava Iyengar (Amma's grandfather), Krishnaswamy Iyengar (Bangala Thatha), (front row, from left) Saundararaja Iyengar (Bangala Thatha's nephew), and Raghavachari (Mutha Thatha) pose at Amma's parents' house on Pachaippa Mudali Street in Kumbakonum. This photograph is over 100 years old and was sent by Radha Madhavan.

Beside this room was another room, which contained several steel cupboards with all the silver and gold of the house. Amma would occasionally come to her father's home to remove or return items and I always accompanied her. The gold and silver that the cupboards contained always fascinated me.

Beyond the hall was a storeroom and a huge dining room with a red cement floor, that could house a hundred people. At the very end of the hall, there was an altar (perumal medai) and a storeroom on the right. To the left of the dining room was an open verandah with a well, and the kitchen was at the end. Then came another broad verandah, which had a large bathroom on its left. It contained a built-in copper cauldron for heating water and stone benches on two sides for keeping baskets of fresh and soiled clothes. A shelf carried soapboxes, a small can of oil, and twin containers with turmeric powder and fresh turmeric. The bathing area was one step down and was open to the sky, floored with hard stone useful for scrubbing heels (who needs pumice stone?!). A huge brass vessel (gangalam) held water for bathing. The gangalam, with its brass handles on each side, would now make a great museum piece. The broad passage

also had a stone bench for coconuts, which were torn open with an iron rod fixed to a wooden plank by farm hands. Beyond the passage was another well and a granary. On the left was a door that opened into another long courtyard that led to the stables and a garden.

The large first floor was divided in two by an open verandah. The front was used for official work and it contained tables, chairs, and bookshelves. The portion at the back was where people slept, and it had a small attached balcony. The verandah had steps leading to the open terraced second floor.

This house was where we spent our holidays and festivals like Diwali. Besides this house, Thatha had another bungalow outside the city, a farmhouse with mango orchards, coconut palms, and bamboo patches, as well as a pond.

Amma was a pampered child, and her word was law to Chithi Thatha, father, siblings, and her sisters in law. Her sister-in-law (Madani), Padmasani Ammal related to me a story about Amma. One day Madani returned to her husband's house from her parents' and was feeding Amma, who was about three or four. Just then her husband, Amma's older brother arrived and asked her when she had arrived, to which Madani replied that she had just returned. At once Amma jumped from her hip and ran to her father, shouting, "Anna, (so she called her father), your son asked his wife a question and she answered at once. She had no respect for her sister-in-law (Naathanar), who is right there." Amma would laugh heartily when this story was told.

Marriage and children

During this time, it was imperative that girls must be married before they reached their teens, or they would be considered old maids. Appa was an eligible boy from a good family and after the horoscopes were matched, women from Appa's family came to Thatha's home to meet Amma. As Appa had no mother, his cousins Thillakka, Ponnakka, and sister Vijayam came from Sirkazhi, a town two hours from Kumbakonum, to meet Amma. They liked her and after ensuring she was literate by having her read from a book, Amma and Appa married in 1928, when she was only twelve years old. I do not know if the two of them met before the wedding, and I wish I had asked Amma about this.

While Amma was petite and frail, Appa was strapping and dark, with a loud, gruff voice. This worried Thatha, as he wondered if the boy would be loving and tender towards his beloved Jayyu. Yet, Appa was the most considerate of husbands, always concerned about his Jayam's well being, as illustrated by this incident soon after their marriage.

It was (and still is) a practice that Vaishnavites

should have on their persons the symbol of Lord Vishnu, the conch (shangu) on the left hand and Chakkaram (Sudarshana wheel) on the right. These symbols would be impressed on the respective shoulders of men and women by pressing a red-hot seal, in a process called the Samarshanam. As was the practice, Amma had a bath and came in her wet clothes and sat before the Aacharya. Throughout the procedure,

Ambulu Ammanga has another story about Amma. There was a difference of six years between Amma and Ammanga. As a child, Ammanga would become breathless when she cried, and Amma had heard that if this happened, the child should be made to lie on the ground on her stomach and should be patted on the back side of her neck. Once when this happened, Amma picked up the child and dropped her headlong on the ground, slapping the child's neck. Ammanga still laughs about this incident, saying, "Your mother tried her best. Still I survived."

Appa stood right behind, holding her shoulders gently. Afterwards, he attended to her throughout the day, ensuring she was comfortable. He cared for her in this same way when she later fought cancer.

Amma had her children young. My oldest brother, Periyanna, was born in 1930, when she was only fourteen years old. My birth certificate states that my mother was 27 years old when I was born. While I was her third living child, she had lost two babies, one born between Periyanna and my second oldest brother, Sampath, and another between Sampath and me. Murali was born four years after me, after which she had another miscarriage. As was the custom in those days, Amma gave birth to all of her children in her father's house, cared for by a distant family member called Sigarathamma (Thamma). She had been widowed young, and like the widows in those days, her head was shaved and she wore only white.

Society was cruel to women in those days, as widows had to shave their heads, wear only white and could not take part in any auspicious occasion in the family. Their food had to be bland, not stimulating, only sustaining.

During that time women in particular, ate betel nut leaf (paan) with supari and calcium hydroxide (chunna), which acted as a digestive and provided calcium. After childbirth, women were given large quantities of paan, after every meal. However, widows were not permitted to have paan, since it was considered to be an aphrodisiac. Men who lost their wives had no such rules though, living a normal life and and marrying again. Women at the time accepted these rules without question, following them rigidly. Singarathamma always made her own food in a small charcoal oven kept in the corner of the dining room. She would prepare the most basic of foods, with very little dal, not much oil, only a few vegetables and no

curds, only watery buttermilk. Yet she still cooked for her nieces and the children, and her pumpkin chutney (thogaiyal) was something to die for. She would share her food with all of us so generously. Thinking about her I realize now that she was unlike Sundari Patti, our cook, who had to work for a living. Thamma had a loving family. If she had wanted to eat better food, no one in the family would have had any objection, but she would not even think

of going against the norms set by a society, which was biased against women. I wonder why women then showed such meek acceptance.

Move to Bangalore

Appa was working at the Central Bank and was posted in

Kumbakonam, though he was sent out of town frequently. We were living in Dabir Street in a fairly big house. Appa became a favourite with Amma's family. They called him by his pet name, Pattu. When Appa decided to resign from his job to move to Bangalore to join in business with Amma's side of the family, they encouraged him. We moved to Bangalore, where Periyamma lived.

Periyamma was Amma's role model. She was the wife of a senior engineer and her husband's family was affluent. She herself was quite fashionable and sophisticated, dressing well and moved with ease in high society. She was very particular about her looks and was extremely wealthy. Once she came to our home in her car, a convenience that was available to only the wealthiest of families in those days, to take Amma out. When Amma was getting ready Periyamma happened to look at her own hands, and upon seeing wrinkles, she asked for some cold cream (that was the moisturizer in those days) and massaged her hands well before going out.

Though Amma and Appa were not as wealthy as



Periyappa, Periyamma and their family celebrate his 60th birthday in Bangalore.



(From left) Dasarathi (Periamma's grandson), Janaki, and Lakshmi play at Periamma's house in Bangalore.

Periyamma, Amma was extremely ambitious, and Periyamma took Amma under her wing. Wanting to meet her sister's high expectations, Amma decided to continue her education, which had stopped after fifth standard in the Saraswathi Vidhyalaya in Kumbakonam. She wanted to learn English, and with Periyamma's help, she invited a woman named Rajam Saraswathi to teach her English. Unmarried and living alone, Rajam Saraswathi would walk long distances to reach Amma's house, but was rewarded since Amma was a good student. Soon Amma could read and write reasonably well, though I do not remember her speaking the language. Rajam Saraswathi brought Amma a small book of one-page stories, Aesop's Fables, which is now with Ranga. Amma could read all of them and write summaries of the stories. The lessons stopped when Rajam Saraswathi opened her own school "Amara Kala Niketan" at which Murali was the first student.

After we moved from Kumbakonam to Bangalore, I was enrolled in St Teresa's convent in the Tamil medium, a path of learning where all subjects were taught in Tamil. Always highly interested in learning English herself and passing it on to her children, Amma wanted me enrolled in the English medium class and used Periyamma's connections to achieve this end.

Periyamma's mother-in-law, Ranganayaki Ammal, a social worker, and Rajalakshmi Madhava Iyengar, the mother of Appa's partners, Kuppuswami and Rangaswamy were both trustees of the elite school Mahila Seva Samaja. Amma requested the management through her sister to admit me in this school. I was given a test, a dictation of a paragraph from a textbook. I passed and was admitted into the sixth grade in 1954.

Mahila Seva Samaja was ahead of its time. The school had both English and Kannada medium classes. The school ran adult education classes for women either destitute or widowed. This class, as well as classes for boys, were up to eighth standard. After that, only women and girls could enroll in the common high school classes. One woman in my class, Leelamma, whose husband had abandoned her, studied very hard, passed her school final with me and later became a teacher at the same school.

Unlike other schools at the time, this school was run by dedicated, hard working and educated women. These exceptional ladies belonged to the richer class, and were modern enough to speak flawless English, though they wore traditional nine-yard sarees. They had a tennis club in the school and played the game dressed in the same manner. They invited dignitaries who visited the city to the school, including Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher and Sarojini Naidu, whose photographs still adorn the school. These teachers encouraged students to be well behaved, exhibit moral conduct and excel in school.

Amma was always extremely proud of my achievements, both in school and otherwise. I was good at reading aloud in both Tamil and English, and both Bangala Thatha and Chithi Thatha would ask me to read aloud. Amma was very proud when they complimented me on my reading. Furthermore, during my final year in school, I was awarded the Sanskrit prize, instituted by Rajalakshmi Madhava Iyengar, and my award pleased Amma to no end. The morning after the prize distribution (my parents had not come for the function) Rajalakshmi invited Amma and me to her house to congratulate me. I cannot forget my mother's beaming face. Her daughter had done her proud.

Vibrant and impulsive

Amma had a variety of interests, one of which was her love of reading, particularly Tamil magazines and novels. She would cut out serial stories from weekly magazines and have them bound into books. There were quite a few of them at home and I have one or two of them with me. These magazines would be delivered either on Thursday evenings or



(From left) Me, Amma, and Bharathi at the Chamarajpet house in Bangalore.

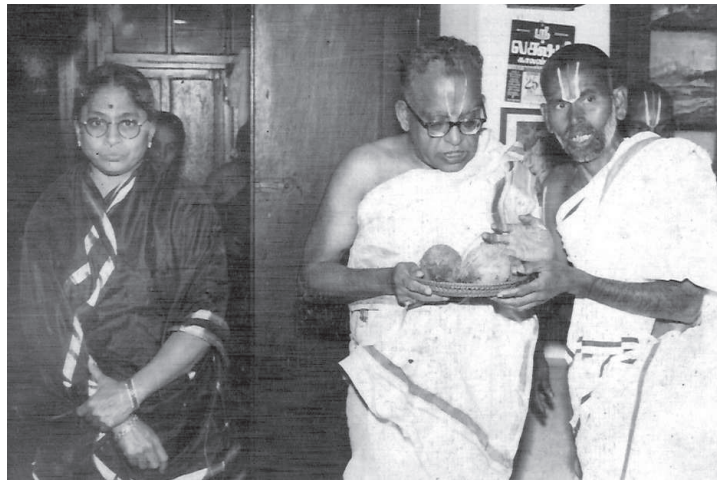
Friday mornings, and I would hurry home on Thursdays to receive them. We would discuss the plight of the characters, and Amma could guess the names of the authors from their styles of writing. These experiences inculcated good reading habits in me, and I was able to get Jayalu and Ranga interested in books. Jayalu is also a voracious reader, and I remember that she read all of my MA literature course selections.

Amma also wanted to learn sewing, and she arranged for Rangamani, a sewing teacher and Sundari Patti's niece, to come in once or twice a week. Rangamani lived in Narasimha Raja colony, far from our home. Despite the distance, she would come to our house around 11 a.m. and stay until evening teaching Amma and my sister-in-law, Saroja Manni to sew. Sometimes Amma, Saroja Manni and I would walk to Rangamani's house and stay there the whole day, learning to cut and make blouses. She made several blouses at home and our servant boy Maya would stitch the buttons and hooks. At the start of these lessons, Amma was in good health and could walk to Rangamani's house with ease. However, as she became weaker, she stopped sewing, since she could not sit for long at the machine.

Amma would also watch most Tamil movies, which would be her Sunday outing with Appa. We had a gramophone and bought a lot of records. Though she was tone deaf, she loved to listen to songs.

Some of Amma's interests were uncommon for women during that time. I remember that she was fond of doing yoga. Though she was always clad in nine yards saris, she could do the poses with ease. Her favorite were the shoulder stand and crunches, which she could do despite her paunch. I never asked her how she got interested in yoga and from where she learnt these asanas. After reading this, my cousin, Rangamani told me that Amma's second brother Raghunathan (Thambi Mama) was very good at yoga and he taught yogic exercises to his older brother and probably Amma had also learned from him.

I heard from Papa Mutha (Rangamani's father) that Amma was very good at math. When Papa Mutha turned eighty years old, I called to wish him, and he told me this story. Amma had been very close to him. They were playmates and often they would play pallanguzhi, a board game played with either tamarind seeds or cowri shells. The jackpot was the Kashi. The players have to be quick in calculating where to start, so as to end with the Kashi. Amma was good at this and often won the jackpot. The punishment for the loser was to say loudly that he ate kootu made with a type of centipede (kattu maravattai) and fried lentil cake (vada) made with the washerman's (dhobi's) feces. I do not know the reason behind the choice of the raw material for the vada.



(From left) Periyamma, Periappa, and the priest perform a ritual at Periappa's 60th birthday in their home.

Amma was very clever and spontaneous in her actions. Once when I was returning from my friend's house, there was a hailstorm for about fifteen minutes, an extremely rare occurrence in Bangalore. I took shelter in a shop and was fascinated to see even sized pebbles of ice showering down. With so many people around I could not pick the hail in my hand, but when I returned home, I was pleasantly surprised by Amma, who had collected the hail in a vessel and stored it in a thermos, where the ice pebbles remained until late night for everyone to enjoy. This was the kind of zest and vibrancy she exhibited in her short life.

Her quick thinking and presence of mind even saved Saroja Manni's life on one occasion. Food in our home was always cooked in the kitchen on firewood or charcoal ovens, but coffee was made by Appa in the dining room on an electric stove. The stove had open coils wound round and held in place by metal loops, and was kept on a table with a wooden plank at the foot of the table. Appa was very particular that everyone stand on the plank while operating the stove to avoid electric shocks. Appa always made coffee in the mornings, and either Amma or Saroja Manni made coffee in the afternoons. One afternoon Amma and I were in the living room, and Manni went to make coffee. As she placed water on the stove, the loops holding the coil gave way, and the red-hot coil sprang up and landed around her neck. She screamed and put one foot on the ground, which gave her a shock. Her sudden scream jolted us and we went running to the dining room. I was shocked, but was immobilized by fear. Amma, on the other hand, took one look at the scene and sprinted to the verandah in the front of the house, opened the meter box and switched off the main. The whole thing must have taken just a few seconds. Amma removed the coil from Saroja Manni's neck, made her sit down, applied some cream on the burn, and comforted her by giving her kozhumor, warmed buttermilk given to people in shock, to drink. I was amazed at my mother's timely reaction. Later that year, Peri-



(From left) Mutha Thatha, Perianna, Dr. Sriraman, and his wife, Hemambujan, during the Kashiyyathra at Perianna's wedding.

yamma's son Sampath and his wife Thilaka toured Europe, bringing gifts for the family, thoughtfully including an electric stove with covered coils for us.

However, Amma's spontaneous nature sometimes made her act impulsively and caused her to be quite short-tempered, though her anger would subside quickly. One day, Meenakshi, our maid stumbled over the store room threshold. A nail from one of her toes got ripped off and her toe started bleeding fast. Meenakshi screamed, pulled from the shelf the bottle with turmeric and saffron powder (puja kumkum) and applied it on the wound. Amma heard her scream and came to see what happened. When she saw that Meenakshi had applied the holy powder on her wound, she took a stick and gave Meenakshi two whacks on her back. She yelled at her for taking God's kumkum and applying it on her toes. Meenakshi did not rebel, instead she hung her head in shame. She told Amma that she was very intolerant to pain and that what she had done was very wrong. Having beaten her, Amma then asked her to wash her feet and she herself applied a medicinal cream over the wound.

I too had been subjected to Amma's wrath, though never my father's. One Saturday, I came home after the customary half-day of school and sat down for lunch. There was lentil stew (kootu) with peanuts in it and since I hated peanuts, I threw the plate with food on the floor. The next minute Amma used her stick on me. She said that I should either eat the food that had been made at home or go hungry. Petrified, I picked up my plate and ate the remaining food, peanuts and all. I did not speak to her for the next four or five days, but I don't think she was sorry for what she did. She said that I should know how to behave. However, after that, whenever Sundari Paatti made kootu, Amma would have some taken out for me without peanuts

Amma could sometimes be hard to understand. One year, when Ambulu Ammanga moved from Bangalore to Salam, she left some Dasara dolls with Amma to be kept in our doll arrangement (kolu). For some reason Amma told Saroja Manni and me in a very stern voice that when people visited our home, we should not tell them that some dolls were the hand-me-downs from Ammanga. I wondered if anyone cared to know this, but did not have the courage to tell her so. However, what Amma did was really funny. To every one, I mean every single person who visited our house, she would show the small Dashavatharam set of ten dolls and one or two other ones and say that Ambulu had given them to her when she moved from Bangalore. Finally I could not take it any more and asked her why she had to warn us not to talk about Ammanga's dolls and then tell every person who came home about them. She looked at me for a minute, shrugged her shoulders and turned around saying, "saridan podi" - another way of asking me to mind my business.

Amma was traditional in her beliefs, but at the same time, practical in her thinking, as was demonstrated by this incident. As with most houses at the time, we had an altar (perumal modai) in our house in Bangalore with pictures and idols of different gods and a saligramam, a set of puja vessels, and a wooden plank with a bar of sandalwood, all of which were a must in every girls' dowry. A saligrammam is a polished round stone found on the riverbanks in Nepal that represents some form of Lord Vishnu. It was kept either in an ornamental wooden box or in a silver box (nagar). The box would look like a coiled snake with seven heads bent over the box like an umbrella. It represents Lord Vishnu sleeping on the snake (Adishesha) on the milky ocean. Aaradhanam is the traditional puja that is done for Lord Vishnu, and was done usually on Tuesdays, Fridays and some special festival days. In our home, Shri Doaraiswamy Iyengar was the priest (Puja Mama). He would arrive around 8 a.m. and start the Aaradhanam. He would first take out the saligrammam, put it on a silver plate and bathe it with well water. He would wipe it dry and set it aside, and then he would start grinding sandal-

Murali was originally named Muralidharan, but he did not like his name, and so took matters into his own hands, telling the teachers at the school that his name was Murali Rajan. His name was changed in the school register and thereafter he officially became Murali Rajan.

wood paste to apply on the Lord. He would then prepare the holy water (perumal theertham), flavouring the water with saffron, cardamom and basil (tulsi) leaves. It tasted divine. Each of us was given either one spoon or three spoons. (I would drink the remaining water after the Puja mama left). One morning, when the Puja Mama was busy grinding sandal wood paste, Ramu, my three-year-old nephew, entered the room and watched him work. When he saw that Mama

was busy, he took the Saligramam in his hand and ran away. Amma saw this and was aghast. She yelled at him to come back, but Ramu ran into the street and Amma sprinted behind him shouting. Someone on the road saw Amma running behind Ramu and caught him and handed him over to her. Amma gave him one hard whack on his backside and returned the saligramam for the puja. As was her habit, Amma repeated this incident to everyone around her. She said that she was shocked beyond words, that her heart skipped a beat and her stomach felt uneasy thinking about the grave sin that had been committed, that the child had taken the saligramam to play with like a marble. That night however, she confided in me that if she had not noticed what Ramu had done then it was quite probable that Mama would not have noticed the absence of the saligramam. He would have closed the box and gone away. He could not be blamed though, for he had to do Aaradhanam in about twenty houses all over town within the next three hours and would have been hard pressed for time.

Growing family

It was around 1955 and Appa's business was going well. Every day, after Appa had his morning snack and before his bath, Amma and Appa would sit in the bedroom near the living room and discuss the future. I remember that around this time they had started buying one sovereign of gold (8 grams) every month to make my wedding jewellery. Over time, Amma collected quite a lot of gold and made jewellery for me, so as to be prepared in the event that my marriage was arranged with short notice.

By this time, my older brothers were already married and had kids. My eldest brother, Srinivasa Raghavan, had two children then, Janaki and Ramu, and would later have one more child, Jayalu. Sampath, my second brother and his wife, Mala had Lakshmi, and would later have three sons, Krishnan, Shrikanth, and Raghavan. We all lived together in the same house at Gavipuram Extension in Bangalore until around 1958, when Sampath was transferred to Hubli, a town in Karnataka, and moved there with his family, before settling down in Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

Janaki was the pet of her grandparents. After Ramu was born, Janaki continued to sleep in the same bed as her parents, perhaps because she was jealous of another sibling sharing their attention. However, at around midnight, every single night, she would start screaming, as only Janaki could, with her screams reverberating throughout the house. Amma felt that this may be happening because she was uncomfortable in the crowded bed and she suggested to Anna and Manni that Janaki should sleep with her. When Janaki

started sleeping between my parents on their bed, she immediately stopped the racket and we were at peace.

Holidays

Bangalore is 3,000 feet above sea level and during those days it was not crowded, since the information technology companies had not yet taken over the city. Trees, lawns and parks were plentiful and the city would be cool in summer. People generally came to Bangalore to spend their summers, but we on the other hand would leave the comfort of Bangalore and spend our summers with Bangala Thatha and Chithi Thatha in Kumbakonam and in Seethakamangalam, a village that they owned, about fourteen miles from Kumbakonam.

Kumbakonam was tolerable since it was equipped with electricity, running water and flushing toilets. But Seethakamangalam, their village, was another story. There was no electricity, no running water, and the area behind the trees in the backyard served as the toilet. I remember we would return to Bangalore covered with prickly heat all over our bodies, and Appa would have Johnson's Prickly Heat Powder ready for us. Chithi Thatha insisted that we spend a lot of time in the village with him and despite its rural setting, I enjoyed my time there. Thatha had two clerks, Seshadri and Tambi, who farmed Thatha's lands. They lived in the area in the village traditionally inhabited by Tamil brahmins (the agraaharam) with their families. Both Seshadri and Tambi had several children each, who served as my playmates. Seshadri was also a very good cook. Before our arrival Thatha would have him make sweets such as mysorepak, kunja ladu, rava ladu, badhusha, wheat halva and theratti pal, and savouries such as thengozhal, manangombu, nada, murukku, cheedai and more. These delicacies were stored in Thatha's

Dasara was an important festival in our home. Most homes would set up displays of religious figurines arranged on steps in their living rooms. There would be a miniature garden too. Women would invite one another over to visit at any time over the ten-day festival and the hosts would give the guests prasada (sundal) to take home. The children on the street would visit every house, every day, more for the prasada than anything else. I too would join them, asking the hosts at every house "Ree, bombe ittideheera?" (Sir or Madam, have you arranged dolls in your house?) This was in spite of knowing full well that almost all the houses had doll arrangements.

bedroom in cane baskets kept under his bed and they were for us to take. I simply loved eating.

The other source of attraction in Seethakamangalam was the village pond, at the end of the street that Chithi Thatha lived in. We would bathe in the pond surrounded by women washing clothes and vessels, children performing their morning ablutions, and cattle being washed by farm hands. Buffaloes would be soaking without moving and



(From Left) Ambulu Ammanga, Papa Mutha, Periyamma and Amma posing at a studio in Kumbakonam.

there would be water snakes swimming around. We did not mind any of these. After bathing in the murky, filthy water of the pond, I would refuse to bathe again at home. I would tell Amma that I had taken a long bath in the pond and needed no more, but Amma never listened to my pleadings.

As shown in the photo above, Amma used to wear a solid gold belt that was pawned repeatedly whenever a lump sum of money was needed. I remember that the belt was pawned so Perianna could buy his first BSA motorbike. He redeemed the belt within the next few months and returned it to Amma.

Every house on that street had a triangular niche on the outside wall near the entrance door. In the evenings, earthen lamps would be placed in them. One such niche in the corner house was deep and I heard that it had a beehive in it. Curious to find out what a beehive looked like, I stuck my hand right inside and out came fury. The bees came out in large numbers and started stinging me all over. I screamed and ran toward Chithi Thatha's home. As the bees followed me, I ran fast and closed the door behind me. By then of course, I had been stung all over and the pain was excruciating. Thatha wanted to summon the doctor from the next village, but my resourceful Amma told him not to. Appa would always give Amma a first aid box, with every medicine that she could possibly need. After all he owned a pharmacy! She applied something all over my wounds and I was just fine.

Though I loved spending time with both Bangala Thatha and Chithi Thatha in Kumbakonam, I could never assume that I could take whatever I wanted from their home. Chithi Thatha had a gramophone and lots of records, which I loved listening to. The records were of the 78 rpm variety and the gramophone had to be wound to provide momentum for the record to revolve. A needle was inserted into the playing head, which had to be lowered on the revolving record. In those days it was a technological wonder. I would

keep playing those records particularly the sound track of Mahatma Gandhi's story, rendered by the then famous Kothamangalam Subbu. The story was told in prose and song and I found it extremely moving. In fact, I heard the record so many times that I knew it by heart. I wanted this set of four records for myself, so I could listen to them in Appa's gramophone player, back in Bangalore. Now when my grand-daughter Apu visited me when she was little, she used to help herself to anything she wanted from my house and as far as I was concerned, whatever she liked was hers to take. In fact, for this, she earned the name, Mohammad of Ghazni from me, after the Moghul king who came to India multiple times and plundered the country. Though I was close to my grandfather, I could never take the liberty of assuming that whatever was his was mine, so it was with great hesitation that I asked him for the records. He immediately had them packed for me. I was euphoric.

I loved to read to Bangala Thatha while he would sit in a cane easy chair on the verandah in their farmhouse. When I finished reading the chosen passage or story, he would open a biscuit tin and give me exactly two Monaco

salt biscuits, imported treats that were always crisp and delicious. I always wanted more but could never ask.

Our family not only visited Kumbakonam annually, but also returned there for special occasions. In 1956 we went there for Mahamagam, a festival that is celebrated once



Amma and I pose in the compound of our house at Gavipuram Extension, Bangalore, before her diagnosis.

every twelve years. I had taken time off from school to be at this rare event, but when we got there, Chithi Thatha would not let me go anywhere near the three temples and ponds where people bathed and prayed. I was confined to the house and satisfied myself by looking at the crowd of people from the second floor balcony. On my return, Saraswathi Swamy, a teacher at my school, asked me what exactly happened in Kumbakonam and how I had enjoyed the experience. I could have cried!

Beginning of the end

Life went on this way for a few years, and then the trouble started. Early in 1960, Amma started complaining of difficulty swallowing due to an intense pain in her throat. One Sunday towards the end of May, when Amma and Appa went to watch a movie, I went with them. In those days vendors would come inside the theater to sell snacks, drinks, and betel leaf (pan) during the movie interval. As was his habit, Appa bought pan for Amma. As we were talking about an interesting scene in the movie, Amma tried to swallow a bit of pan but found that she simply could not. Tears started flowing from her eyes due to the excruciating pain. Appa got her a cup of coffee, something Amma would never have consented to drink on normal days. She grabbed it, started taking tiny sips and somehow managed to push the pan down her throat. That would be the last movie I ever saw with both of them.

Though something had to be done about Amma's throat condition, Amma and Appa still had to go to Kumbakonam the next day to attend a puja, which Chithi Thatha had insisted they attend. Since there was no direct train to Kumbakonam, they had to change trains at either Trichi or Chennai. When they returned, passing through Chennai, Appa and Sampath, who was living there, took Amma to a



Murali, with his constant companion, a cricket bat, poses at our home in Gavipuram Extension in Bangalore.

doctor. A barium x-ray was taken and the next day Sampath called to say that the doctor had some concerns and wanted to examine Amma again. Amma was diagnosed with throat cancer in June and was immediately admitted in to the Cancer Institute in Chennai; Appa stayed on with her.

The Cancer Institute was a newly founded organization, headed by two dedicated oncologists, Drs. Sadashivan and Shantha. They were pioneers in treating cancer with cobalt rays, and since Amma was too weak to withstand surgery, they began the cobalt radiation treatment at once. The Institute treated poor people free of charge, though space was limited. One long corridor was filled with patients lying on beds on the floor. Despite the crowded conditions, treatment was the same for both paying and free patients. Amma was admitted into the female ward in a twin sharing room, and her roommate was called Kaundammal. That was not her real name, but indicated that she belonged to the Kaunda caste. She did not have children and her husband had married again, though she continued to live with the family. After she was diagnosed with cancer and was admitted into the Institute, none of her family members bothered to visit her. In contrast, Amma had visitors every evening, including Sampath, Papa Mutha, and others. Kaundammal must have felt very lonely during these times, and she would turn towards the wall and pretend to be asleep. Appa and Amma felt sorry for her, and tried to make her stay bearable by bringing her coffee and offering her food. They became quite friendly with each other as Amma's stay progressed. Though she felt bad for Kaundammal, Amma was secretly proud of her own loving family, who ensured she never felt alone during her stay. Every weekend Amma would go to Sampath's house in Lakshmipuram, returning on Monday morning in time for her treatment. It was here that Amma met her classmate Jayalakshmi, whose brother was Thiruvengadathan Ramanujam (T. Ramanujam), who Appa knew during his Kumbakonam days. At that point, Amma and Appa, with my consent, decided to arrange my marriage, since Amma



(Front row, from left) Amma's brothers Raghavachari, Ragunathan (Thambi Mama), his wife, Komalavalli, and Raghavachari's wife Padmasini enter Periappa's house during his 60th birthday celebration. (Back row) Amma is third from left and is holding Janaki.



Parthasarathy and I visit Thirupathi the day after our wedding.

knew she did not have much longer to live. When Shri. T. Ramanujam suggested his son in law's brother, G.R. Parthasarathy, for me to marry, Amma and Appa accepted.

Amma returned home in December of that year, and the wedding arrangements began immediately. My future husband came over to meet my family and myself, and the wedding date was set for February 2nd, 1961. Though she had to be careful about her diet and had to take many medicines, Amma was in good spirits as she and Periyamma started the preparations. Appa spared no expense, agreeing to everything that Amma wanted. Saries were purchased for the relatives and me, and my jewellery and silver vessels were ordered. Appa designed a pair of large, heavy lamps (kuthu vilakku) for me, and Amma bought me a sandal wood mandap, a silver nagar, and a gold cup designed like a lotus to store the saligramam, out of which the gold cup has remained in my bank locker for the past fifty years.

Amma made several trips to the busy Chickpet wholesale market area to buy sarees, vessels, and other wedding requirements and Periyamma never left her alone. Within a month everything for the wedding had been bought. Many of our relatives came for the wedding. A concert by the then famous singer Madurai Mani Iyer was arranged. The wedding was celebrated according to Amma's wishes. Murali's Poonal was also held on the same day.

I stayed in Bangalore with my husband for a week after the wedding. We then left for Chennai, from where we proceeded to Lucknow where my husband had been posted.

I remember the day of our departure well. Appa and Amma came to the station, and we all cried. That was the last day I saw her alive.

In April, Amma went to the Cancer Institute for a check up, and was told that she was doing well. Amma's

46th birthday that year was celebrated "like a child's first birthday", according to her last letter to me written after the event, in which she told me that she had missed me on the occasion. To celebrate the milestone, Anna had got her a two- stringed gold chain and Appa had insisted on getting her a new silk sari, a green one with an orange and gold border.

In June, 1961, Amma's health took a turn for the worse. She began having chest pains. On her last evening, at about 8 p.m., she complained of chest pain and a cardiologist came home to treat her. Amma was being helped by her sister to get up to see the doctor. when she passed away. She died on Wednesday, July 27th, 1961, with a heart specialist waiting outside the room.

At the time of her death I was in Delhi with GRP, who had to do some training there. When we received the telegram in Delhi informing us about Amma's demise, the scene played out like a Bollywood movie. I received the news around midnight, and at once GRP and I agreed that I should leave for Bangalore on the next flight. In those days the journey from Delhi to Bangalore, via Hyderabad, took nearly seven hours. We went to the airport and bought the ticket, but there was still no guarantee that I would get a seat in Hyderabad to proceed to Bangalore. Some gentleman who was also traveling to Bangalore offered to help me, offering me his seat from Hyderabad to Bangalore in case I did not have one. This kind gesture proved to be unnecessary, since I got a seat on the plane in Hyderabad, and was soon on my way to Bangalore.

I was numb throughout the flight. I had never flown before and had never even traveled anywhere alone. When I reached Bangalore, in the afternoon, I just stood there, wondering what I should do. Periyamma had thought ahead though, and asked Appa to wait for at least one flight from Delhi in case I came. Since I had been such a protected daughter, accompanied by a servant wherever I went as a child, Appa did not even think that I would travel all the way from Delhi by plane. The body was taken for the last rites, but despite this, Periyamma did not give up, asking Kannan, her eldest son, to send someone to the airport. As I stood, completely confused, in the airport, the gentleman approached me, asking if I was Kannan's cousin Kamala. He said that Kannan had asked him to put me on the transit bus from the airport to the airline office at South Parade. I could take a taxi from there to reach home. I had doubts whether I should go with him, so I did the only sensible thing I had done all day; I telephoned home. Periyamma picked up the phone, and when she heard my voice she said, "Do not have any expectations. Your Amma's remains have already been taken away." She told me that the house was getting washed, as is the custom after a death in the family. Some workers

from the pharmacy were helping out, and Periyamma asked one of them, Srinivas, to go to the cemetery. She told him to stop the proceedings if Amma's body had not been lit yet, but if it had, he was to come back without telling anyone anything. She then called Kannan and asked him to pick me up from the airline office. They later told me that Srinivas went very fast and when he saw that Anna was getting ready to light the pyre, he rang a bell loudly and shouted for them to wait. While this was occurring, Kannan picked me up from the airline office and took me straight to the cemetery. Amma had been washed and had been placed on the pyre, with firewood piled all over her body, though her face and arms were still visible. Her hands were folded in a namaste and her visible elbow was smooth and white. I took one long look at her face, which appeared to be smiling. The memory of her face and elbow is still etched in my mind. As I write this now, I am reliving that moment. Anna and Sampath were standing near the body with tears flowing down their faces, while Murali and Appa were standing at a distance. I put some rice in Amma's mouth and then went and stood with Appa. As the body was consigned to the flames, Appa's face was a picture of agony and Murali was shivering. Appa held my hands as we said good-bye to Amma. I do not remember if we ate lunch, which had been sent from Periyamma's house, that day. Our home had been completely washed to remove all traces of my mother, and the thirteen day rites were performed with extreme devotion.

When Amma passed away Janaki, Lakshmi and Ramu were very young. Kichi must have been three months old. None of the other grand children have any idea about the kind of person she was. But Rangamani had visited our home many times. Amma and all of us would meet annually in Kumbakonam at my Mama's house. Rangamani has some good memories of my mother and she wrote a lovely email about Amma, which I have incorporated verbatim.



Parthasarathy and I during our wedding with Amma and Appa behind and Murali, the bowler playing an imaginary game of cricket

Rangamani wrote.....

Her name was Jayalakshmi. Her husband lovingly called her Jayam. She was my father's aunt and we children called her Kunjathai. The first thing I remember about her is her smile. It was from the heart and lit up her face. She was always available for us kids, ready to play games and share jokes. More hilarious than the games we played were the punishments she invented for the loser. She would make the loser repeat horrible things like "I ate a pudding made of centipede" or "I made vadas out of dobhi's shit and ate them". Once one of us uttered these words, the entire clan would tease him or her the whole day, saying he or she stank because of what he or she ate, quoting the words that person said and making him or her cringe. She would never make fun of the loser though, and I remember how she would pull me close to her and hug me and kiss me on my head. That made me feel very special and the horror of the punishment melted away.

It was customary to gather at my grandmother's home for holidays. All of our relatives and their kids came, as would Kunjathai. Once she brought a huge load of high quality dry fruits, which vanished seconds after we pounced on them, much to her amusement. She said that we gobbled up the food like we had never seen it before, and from then on, dry fruits were always known as "what has never been seen before" (kannale kanathathu). Every holiday she made sure she would bring larger and larger loads of these and they still vanished in minutes. Years after she passed away, we still call dry fruits by the name she gave them and remember her with love and joy.

She was a favorite of a grand uncle, who was a terror to everyone else. Once, when my parents and others sneaked out to a late night movie, they made sure she led them on their return home. Though our grand uncle was waiting with severe countenance, he could not be angry once he saw her. While she held a loving conversation with him, the rest of the culprits snuck quietly indoors, spared from his harsh words. Needless to say, Kunjathai was the heroine for the next several days!

She was tone deaf but nevertheless burst into song whenever she wanted. She could enjoy a joke at her own expense and said that her music master fell before a running train since he was unable to teach her. This became a legend in the family and whenever a girl proposed to learn music, she was always warned to think of the teacher's fate!

We were still young when she was struck by cancer. We lived in Chennai and she came over frequently for treatment at Cancer Institute. Her family and the entire clan traveled to the Institute to be with her at the hospital, and made sure to bring her food and other requirements. Her youngest son was couple of years older than me and we kids were taken to visit her off and on. I remember once when we were at her side, she showed us a horrible festering wound in her arm. We were shocked, moved to tears by the sight. She then pulled her arm away and laughed, saying it was made from dye. We believed her and laughed at her prank, telling her not to fool us again. Looking back, I cannot imagine how much effort it must have taken her to make light of her suffering. But that was who she was, always thinking of others.

When the hospital closed for couple of days for

some reason, we were looking forward to having her home, and she soon arrived, accompanied by another patient, a lady who had nowhere to go since her relatives lived far away. She made sure her friend was given as much love and affection as she herself received.

During her life, she had a partner who was as kind as she was herself. Her husband was a very dear uncle to us. They enjoyed life, despite her sickness. They saw the latest movies, in English or Tamil, and always held hands when they walked, a rarity for those times. He loved her dearly and supported her in everything. Like the rest of us, he was shattered when she passed away in her forties.

Kunjathai lived at a time when girls were not educated. She was married off early and sent off to Bangalore. She must have faced a lot of ups and downs in life, as money was tight sometimes. She still never let anything bring her down and lived with zeal until the end of her life. Decades after her demise, the entire clan still talks of her with love, readily recalling many happy memories. She made an impact on me as a child and I will always think of her with joy and awe for the way she fought through her demanding illness and yet remained a gentle and affectionate aunt.

Author's note: *Amma was called Kunjathai as she was the youngest among the siblings and was almost the contemporary of her nephew, Papa Mutha and Ambulu Ammanga. She was indeed the favourite among all of her nieces and nephews.*

Her music master did die in a tragic accident when he fell headlong on the railway track and was crushed. Amma could still laugh at herself when people teased her that he committed suicide due to her lack of singing skill.

The wound that Rangamani saw was not actually a dye, but a wound on her skin due to exposure to cobalt rays. She had another one near on her chest, and they were extremely painful. I remember her telling me that her cancer was getting killed in that place.

I was quite apprehensive when I started Amma's biography. My time with her was very short. She was gone at such a young age and at the most impressionable period of my life. I was not sure that I would be able to put on paper the essence of her personality. I did ask around and started writing. Now looking back I feel I may have touched upon her many qualities that endeared her to so many. She was fun loving, so interested in life and was ever willing to learn. She was ambitious for her children and dearly loved and was devoted to her husband, supporting him always. She was also impulsive and short tempered and many a time acted at the spur of the moment. What makes me happy is the fact that the events that I have described in this record were all experienced by me personally. They were not hearsay. Even in her short life she presented a complete picture of herself that I was able to put in writing. Such was her personality. Had she lived longer, all her children would have had so much to share with her. She too would have been proud of

her children and grandchildren. But I am happy that I was able to do this much. Silly thought, but she too would have been interested in knowing what her children felt about her and how her daughter pictured her.

And to conclude.....

Five years back Sampath wanted to do something special in Appa and Amma's memory. It was decided to finance the cost of building a green room in the new auditorium in Mahila Seva Samaja. Amma had great regard for that school and had insisted that Janaki also be admitted in the same school, years after I graduated from the institution. Sampath had requested every one of the family to contribute what they could. Pity he did not live to see complete. The room stands today with a marble tablet above the door with the names of my parents.

Last year we were in London at Jayalu's home on Appa's death anniversary. To commemorate the day, Jayalu arranged for an aarati at the temple in the names of both my parents. This year Jayalu took part in a marathon walk in aid of cancer research in the UK and dedicated her participation to Amma's memory. I would like to think that it is the biography that has brought the grandchildren closer to their grandparents.

Even at the age of sixty-seven, I have memories that come flooding into my mind. Fortunately, there are still some people in my family who could give an idea of the younger days of my parents. My daughters, cousin and nieces encouraged me to write this biographical account.

My only regret is that none of my three brothers is alive to read the biography. Had they been around, I would have had a great time writing. They would have agreed with some narrations, refuted some others, had their own versions of some events, corrected my thought process and would have finally grunted their approval. But it was not to be.

By writing their biography, I do not know if I have paid my tribute to my parents. But during the process of writing this I have relived my days with them, joys, sorrows and all. I feel blessed.

